

# Naughty or nice?

Shifting focus of team development from fixing “naughty” to investing in “nice”

Helen Zink 8 August 2025

What if Santa Clause only focused on the naughty list, ignoring the nice list – because those children are fine as they are aren't they?

A few things might happen:

- The “nice” children might wonder if it is worth any of their effort to be nice.
- Some might switch to the “naughty” side to get Santa’s attention.
- Others might switch off completely - the silent disengaged.
- “Naughty” children might actively recruit disillusioned ex- “nice” listers.
- The “naughty” list would grow!

Yet this is exactly what most organisations do. They focus on “naughty” teams, investing in team development only when there is a problem to fix – they are struggling, underperforming, or there is conflict - leaving effective teams to manage on their own.

## Focus on nice

I am not suggesting that teams in real strife and dysfunction should be ignored. But I am suggesting more should be invested in average and well performing teams, and those with high potential.

There is plenty of evidence indicating that increased focus on “nice” would

## The evidence

Well documented studies in positive psychology and neuroscience tell us:

1. *What you focus on is what you get.* Focusing expectations and attention on something, can significantly influence performance and behaviour on that thing - creating self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).
2. *Strengths are highly beneficial.* Studies show performance increases by 36% when strengths are emphasised, compared to a 27% decrease when weaknesses are targeted (Strengths Profile, 2025).
3. *Positive ripple effect.* Investing in development in one part of an organisation rubs off on other parts of the organisation (O’Conner & Cavanagh, 2013).

## The shift

There is a common human tendency to focus on what is broken rather than what is working. In today’s economic climate with organisations in stress, budget constraints and limited resources, focus on natural instincts might be emphasised even more. However, by concentrating on problems, organisations risk missing out on significant opportunities.

A mindset shift is required: recognising that average and well performing teams are not “fine” – they are high-potential assets that can deliver even more value when nurtured.



Richard Hackman (2002), a pioneer in the study of team effectiveness, reminds us that high performing teams do not happen by accident - they are built over time with intention, presence, and practice.

In today's challenging and uncertain environment, teams need more than ever to strengthen their ability to manage change, collaborate effectively, solve problems, and build resilience. Team development makes this possible.

Do not leave it to Santa. Let science guide team development investment decisions - back the "nice" as well as fixing the "naughty".

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