Synchrony is defined as a “Simultaneous action, development, or occurrence.” When it comes to startup teams, synchrony is also a representation of unity, team strength, and cohesive vision. This paper is based on new academic research on pitch presentations by teams from Startup Weekend events in 2012 and 2013. The research found more synchronized teams were judged as more successful.

This paper offers a best-practice process for getting your team in sync and ultimately helping your team to be more successful. You can practice steps to team synchrony easily at Startup Weekend events. On Friday evening, before getting to work, spend time getting to know your team. Next, let everyone work on their tasks based on their skill sets. Train as a team for your final presentation, and just before the presentation induce synchrony by incorporating something as simple as cheering together.

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The Value of Synchrony

What We Know, What We’ve Learned

What is the recipe for an effective presentation of your business model to potential investors, knowledgeable mentors, and prospective employees? Obviously you have to have a good idea. Of course you need to do your homework to map the competitive space, validate your customers, and produce a sound financial model. And, everyone knows that you need to deliver an engaging, compelling presentation that showcases the technology that you have developed.

When presenting your business as a team, however, there may be an additional, subtle ingredient that attracts the interest of investors, mentors, and valuable talent—your team’s level of synchrony during your presentation.

In the dictionary, synchrony is defined as “simultaneous action, development, or occurrence.” In your team, synchrony reflects the extent to which the members of your team experience and enact behaviors and emotions in tandem, or all together, over the course of time. For example, in a highly synchronized team, when one team member feels and shows a high-energy emotion like passion, other team members do as well. And, similarly, when one team member feels and shows a low-energy emotion, such as calmness, other team members also experience and show low-energy emotions. The emotions of synchronized team members thus run in parallel over the course of a presentation, moving up and down together over time. In contrast, the behaviors and emotions of an unsynchronized team converge and diverge over time, rather than moving together in lockstep.

Over the past year, my colleagues and I have conducted a systematic investigation of how team synchrony during business model presentations influences outsiders’
perceptions of the quality of a team’s idea, the thoroughness of a team’s preparation, and the overall level of a team’s effectiveness (see Appendix A for greater detail). Specifically, we used wearable sensors that tracked several individual physiological metrics to measure team members’ levels of synchrony with one another and the extent to which judges became synchronized with a team as it presented its business model. We integrated these physiological data with surveys completed by team members and judges to understand the attributes of a team that contribute to synchrony and how synchrony influences judges’ evaluations of the team’s pitch.

**A Tale of Two Teams**

The graphs below depict two Startup Weekend teams that participated in our research. The gray lines show team members’ energy during their team’s business model presentation. The green lines represent the energy of three members of the panel of judges during the team’s presentation. Team A exhibits relatively higher synchrony among team members and with the panel of judges, with members’ lines and the judges’ lines moving in tandem. Team B exhibits relatively lower synchrony, with team members’ and judges’ lines exhibiting little joint movement. Team A was ranked in the top three teams for the competition, while Team B was not.

The results of our research show that team synchrony during a presentation operates as a subtle signal, drawing audience members into a presentation and leading them to perceive the presentation and the team in a positive light. Indeed, in our data, those teams that placed in the top three teams of the entrepreneurship competition were approximately **15 percent** more synchronized than teams that did not place. Below,
drawing from my own and others’ research on synchrony, I highlight why you and your co-founding team should be attuned to your synchrony during business model presentations. And, I offer simple, practical recommendations for how you can increase your level of experienced and displayed synchrony during your next business model presentation.

My study of entrepreneurial teams at Startup Weekend events revealed that those teams that were highly synchronized - that is, those teams in which members’ physiological indicators of energy moved in tandem over the course of the presentation - were judged as more well-prepared, more creative, and overall more effective than teams low in synchrony.

In part, this was because high-synchrony teams, in contrast to the low-synchrony teams, were most effective in drawing the panel of judges into their rhythms, entraining the judges’ energy with the team’s energy over the course of their presentations. There are three reasons why getting your team in sync for a presentation will strengthen your team’s effectiveness and lead to more favorable reactions from potential investors, mentors, or prospective employees.

1. **Synchrony reinforces social cohesion and group solidarity.**

   Being in sync is an outward sign of your team’s unity. Individuals who experience synchrony with others are more likely to cooperate with one another, experience empathy, and engage in prosocial behaviors—helping one another out when needed. Cooperation, empathy, and prosocial behavior among startup team members are essential ingredients to new venture success, given the many challenges that arise on the startup journey.

2. **Synchrony helps to communicate group solidarity to outsiders who observe group interactions.**

   With its deep evolutionary roots (see inset), synchrony is a powerful signal that a collection of individuals are united in some important way—that the group is a team pursuing jointly held goals and objectives. In one series of studies, for example,
researchers asked observers to rate photographs that depicted a group of people either displaying (a) the same or (b) different emotions. Observers were instructed to rate the extent to which the individuals in the images were a team in pursuit of shared goals. Findings showed that raters actually used the consistency of individuals’ emotions—that is, the degree to which the people pictured in photographs expressed the same feelings—as a key indicator of whether the individuals shared goals with one another. Given that having shared goals is a defining characteristic of work teams, this research suggests that whether or not a group exhibits outward displays of synchrony influences outsiders’ beliefs about whether the group is a true team or not.

3. It feels good to experience synchrony with other people.

Research has shown that being in sync with others is inherently pleasing; when people engage in synchronous activity, such as tapping on a desk in a rhythm together, they report feeling more positively than when engaging in asynchronous, uncoordinated activity. Because individuals’ feelings are an important input to perceptions, judgments, and attitudes, the positive feelings created by synchrony can powerfully shape the judgments of outsiders who observe or experience group interactions, such as a business model presentation.

Teams that experience and display synchrony during business model presentations are likely to pull observers into their rhythms and attract positive reactions to their entrepreneurial ideas. In addition to examining the effects, or outcomes, of synchrony, related research has used a variety of methods to understand the inputs to synchrony—that is, what leads people to become synchronized with one another. This research, as well as my own study of synchrony in entrepreneurial teams, provides a roadmap for teams seeking to reap the benefits of synchrony during a business model presentation.
How to Get Synchronized

5 Steps to Successful Pitching at Startup Weekend

There are steps that you can take to get your team in sync—in behavior and energy—for major performance events, such as a brief presentation of your business model to angel investors. The simple five-step process below outlines an approach you might take, over time, to maximize your team’s outward displays of synchrony during a business model presentation.

1. Build Cohesion

Team cohesion—positive interpersonal ties among team members—is a vital foundation for synchrony. In my Startup Weekend study, I found that the teams that displayed the most synchrony during their business model presentations were the most cohesive ones (according to surveys that team members completed hours prior to their presentation). My findings mirror the results of other studies of synchrony. For example, in one fascinating study of synchrony in individuals’ heart rates during a firewalking ritual, researchers found that audience members’ heart rates were most likely to
synchronize with a firewalker’s—a person walking across burning coals—when they shared a close interpersonal connection.

The value of team cohesion transcends just synchrony, of course. Hundreds of studies of thousands of groups and teams have shown that cohesion promotes high group performance across a range of tasks. Taking the time to develop cohesion and strengthen team members’ interpersonal relationships will likely enhance not just your effectiveness in presenting your new venture idea, but also your effectiveness in executing on your plans and making your ideas a reality.

To develop cohesion, the members of your team must take the time to learn about one another’s backgrounds, interests, and reasons for pursuing this specific entrepreneurial effort. The members of a co-founding team often have diverse backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Spending time in conversations that move beyond work and the specific project at hand enables team members to know one another on a deeper, more personal level, which is critical for forging the positive interpersonal relationships that are the building blocks of team cohesion. One simple way to begin building cohesion is for team members to purposefully identify three points of commonality in their interests, backgrounds, or experiences—outside of the context of the work. So, for example, team members might identify common hobbies or entertainment interests (e.g., favorite music, TV shows, or movies). Having a few points of commonality outside of the new venture can develop positive interpersonal relationships that promote synchrony during performance events.

2. Divide & Prepare

The most effective creative teams are melting pots of individuals with diverse knowledge sets, skills, experiences, and perspectives. When preparing your business model presentation, leverage this diversity by dividing core functional tasks among team members and deferring to one another’s expertise in a given area. Doing so will increase the quality of your team’s presentation by ensuring that the person with the most relevant expertise is leading the charge and crafting content for the business model presentation. For example, a team member with a background in financial modeling might own the chunk of the presentation related to five-year revenue and
profit projections. Preparing your initial business model presentation in this way will likely also enhance your team’s efficiency in vetting, honing, and refining core components of your presentation. Use the power of division of labor once your team has a clear direction to enrich the quality of the different components of your presentation.

3. Unite & Practice

Everyone knows that you should practice and rehearse a business model presentation before a major performance event. And, yet, many teams fail to practice and rehearse in ways that set the stage for a synchronized presentation. In preparing their business model presentations, team members often persist in the “divide and prepare” approach, practicing and rehearsing their individual chunks of the presentation alone. As described above, this approach helps a team quickly and efficiently polish the different components of a presentation, such as the technology demonstration or the roll-out strategy. However, if team members devote too much time to practicing their own, individual components, the result can be a choppy, disjointed presentation that lacks displayed synchrony. A lack of synchrony, as my findings show, can subtly influence the degree to which external stakeholders view the team as a highly functioning social unit.

The science of synchrony underscores the importance of practicing a business model presentation collectively (i.e., all together, as a group) and seamlessly (i.e., from start to finish). This is akin to the numerous full dress rehearsals that the cast of a Broadway show completes before opening night or the many hours that a rock band invests in full rehearsals before embarking on a multi-city tour. Once the members of your team have vetted their individual components and crafted raw content for the presentation, the team as whole should begin practicing and rehearsing the presentation, working from start to finish as a group. In doing so, team members not only practice and refine handoffs and transitions between the different components of the presentation, but also strengthen their experienced and displayed synchrony during the presentation. As a rule of thumb, once team members have crafted content for the presentation and have stitched separate parts together, your team should try to complete a minimum of five collective and seamless run-throughs of the business model presentation before the actual pitch.
4. Induce Synchrony

In the minutes before a major presentation, you have an opportunity to bring your group’s synchrony to the surface. A fascinating takeaway from research on synchrony is that the members of a group can heighten their levels of synchrony before a presentation or other performance event with very simple activities, such as a thirty-second group cheer. These simple, routine activities can have big effects on group dynamics and the perceptions of outsiders (e.g., potential investors). Groups that use these small behavioral routines exhibit enhanced teamwork, cooperation, and strengthened interpersonal connections. Further, research shows that outsiders view groups that use these small inductions of synchrony as more cohesive and more likely to be pursuing commonly held goals.

The use of short routines to induce synchrony before presentations and performance events is one place where science meets practice. There are many examples of real-world teams that use small routines before performance events to set the stage for synchrony and effective teamwork. Sports teams, for example, often enact a routine, ritual cheer before games or matches. (The members of Olympic volleyball teams take this to the extreme, engaging in routine, ritual, and sequenced high-fiving in between each point of a game.) Rock bands also are known to engage in pre-show rituals—such as reciting certain lyrics together—immediately prior to taking the stage for live concerts. For example, the members of the heavy metal band Metallica huddle together before each show while a particular song (Ecstacy of Gold) blasts throughout the venue. The members of the rock band Foo Fighters reportedly engage in a routine ritual of simultaneously drinking shots of Jagermeister together while listening to classic Michael Jackson songs—not a recommended approach for startups heading into a boardroom!

It may sound silly. But, engaging in a routine or ritual together with your teammates before a major presentation is a low-cost, low-risk way to enhance the likelihood that your startup team is synchronized during a significant performance event.
5. Pitch!
You’ve built a cohesive team, deferred to one another’s expertise in carefully preparing and vetting your presentation content, practiced your presentation collectively and seamlessly multiple times, and induced synchrony in the minutes immediately before your presentation. All that’s left is to blow your audience away with your novel and impactful new venture idea and a strong signal sent by your team’s synchronized delivery.
When To Use Synchrony

Attract Others to Your New Venture

As depicted in the process above, your goal should not be to experience and display synchrony with your team members throughout all components of preparing a business model presentation. Indeed, although little explored by empirical research, there may be real costs to team members being overly synchronized across different portions of a project. Teams that work and move tightly in lockstep may, for example, fail to adequately explore and consider alternative points of view or differing ideas and opinions during the early stages of putting together a business model presentation. It is especially during these early stages, as recommended above, when adopting a divide and prepare strategy can be particularly useful.

The science of synchrony shows, however, that you and your team members should consciously seek to establish synchrony during the later stages of preparing your presentation. Synchrony has deep evolutionary roots and is both a result of and an indicator of the extent to which the members of your team are cohesive and in pursuit of common goals. My research on entrepreneurial teams at Startup Weekend shows that synchrony during a business model presentation can significantly and positively shape outsiders’ perceptions of your team and your new venture idea. Those teams that were rated most highly in my study were approximately 15 percent more synchronized than teams that did not gain traction with the panel of judges. Using the process outlined above, you can—in a very low cost way—increase the likelihood that you and your teammates experience and display synchrony during your business model presentation and attract investors, mentors, and prospective talent.
Conclusion

As we see in this paper, synchrony can be intentionally induced with direct, positive impact on your work as a startup. It is our hope that you will now be better prepared the next time you give an important pitch. We recommend that you take action and begin implementing a more deliberate level of synchrony within your own team-based ventures. This paper offers a starting point, but genuine team synchrony is also a subjective matter, and you must work with your team to develop the type of synchrony that mirrors your dynamic and chemistry.

Startup Research is on a mission of reducing the ‘noise’ of the startup world, amplifying the signal, and providing actionable, useful research for the entrepreneurial community. We aim to do so by bridging the gap between academics and grassroots entrepreneurs, and this paper is the first from an academic source that we’ve circulated.

If Startup Research succeeds, the useful content and data that was once only available to large corporations will be widely accessible for startups and grassroots leaders as well. We appreciate your feedback, as it is a critical part of helping us develop the next generation of actionable startup research.
Recommended Reading

General Resources


Resources Especially for Research Nerds


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How We Studied Synchrony at Startup Weekend

With my colleague Sigal Barsade (the Joseph Frank Bernstein Professor of Management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School) and the help of the team at Startup Research, I examined the causes and consequences of synchrony in Startup Weekend teams.

Research Setting

Startup Weekend is a three-day, team-based entrepreneurship event. On the first day of the event, individuals pitch raw new venture ideas in a rapid-fire series of sixty-second elevator speeches. Teams form around a subset of these ideas, and team members work to advance their team’s idea over the course of the weekend. On the third day of the event, teams present their work—typically in a five- to seven- minute business model presentation—to a panel of judges. The judges select and rank the top three teams of the event based on the new venture, the business model, and the work that the team accomplished over the weekend.

Sample

We collected data at five Startup Weekend events located on the East Coast and in the Midwest of the United States. In total, we collected data from more than fifty teams and nearly 250 team members. Additionally, we collected data from fifteen judges who served on the panels evaluating teams’ final business model presentations.

Data Sources

Participating team members completed surveys during the morning of the third day of the entrepreneurship event. Later that day, during the business model presentations, participating team members wore wristband sensors that tracked their emotional
energy using physiological indicators (i.e., electrodermal activity and physical motion). And, judges wore the same wristband sensors to track their emotional energy during the business model presentations. Judges also completed short surveys after each team’s business model presentation, rating team performance across several dimensions.

**Key Findings**

Highly cohesive teams, as reported by team members through surveys early on the third day of the event, exhibited the most synchrony during their business model presentations. Team cohesion—consisting, in part, of team members’ positive interpersonal relationships with one another—is a meaningful input to team synchrony during a performance event.

The most synchronized teams—where team members’ energy levels moved in tandem—were most effective at bringing the panel of judges into their rhythms. That is, highly synchronized teams pulled judges into sync with team members. Team synchrony provides a strong signal that is most likely to engage outsiders.

When judges were highly synchronized with a team presenting its business plan, judges perceived the presentation as better prepared, the ideas as more creative, and the team as higher performing, overall. Teams that placed in the top three of the competition were approximately 15 percent more synchronized than teams that did not place.
Appendix B

Evolution & Synchrony

A flock of geese soars overhead, wings flapping in tandem. A school of fish changes direction abruptly, yet seamlessly. The rhythmic sound of crickets chirping in unison provides the soundtrack for a warm summer night. Synchrony—actions, behaviors, or feelings that occur in tandem over time—abounds in nature and has fascinated scientists for thousands of years.

Our understanding of synchrony emerges from research across a diverse range of scientific disciplines—such as physics, biology, sociology, and psychology. The scientific literature on synchrony is filled with fascinating explorations that tackle important questions. At the microscopic level, the science of synchrony has shed light on, for example, how the cells in your heart, at this very moment, are firing in synchrony to power your beating heart. And, on a larger scale, the science of synchrony has tackled questions of how and why enormous crowds of people—such as the audience at a concert—fall into and out of synchrony in their applause patterns.

Researchers have documented synchronous behavior in groups of fish, crickets, geese, baboons, and humans—to name just a few of the species known to get in sync. Because synchronized behavior appears across species, researchers believe that group synchrony—that is, when the members of a group exhibit patterns of behavior that ebb and flow together, in tandem—is adaptive and enables organisms to most effectively take advantage of opportunities and void threats in their environments. Said differently, group synchrony likely has deep evolutionary roots.

Many scholars believe that human groups evolved to display, in particular, emotional (experiences and expressions of feelings that occur in tandem) and behavioral synchrony (patterned behavior exhibited in tandem) to fulfill basic social functions. Specifically, emotional and behavioral synchronies are believed to reinforce group solidarity, social cohesion, and cooperation among group members. It is widely
thought that humans evolved to cooperate with one another initially in relatively small social groups because the group-based structure enhanced the likelihood of survival and reproduction. Synchrony provides an outward mark of group membership and, researchers believe, helps individuals classify one another as friend, foe, or neither. For example, in a recent study of the effects of behavioral synchronization between strangers, researchers found that simply having two people tap their fingers on a table in sync—so, the two people tapped together, in the same rhythm—increased their feelings of compassion for one another and the extent to which they engaged in altruistic, prosocial behavior. Other studies similarly have shown that inducing simple behavioral synchrony between people increases the extent to which they feel socially connected and trust one another. By strengthening the informal structure that holds group members together, synchrony may have indirectly contributed to human adaptation.