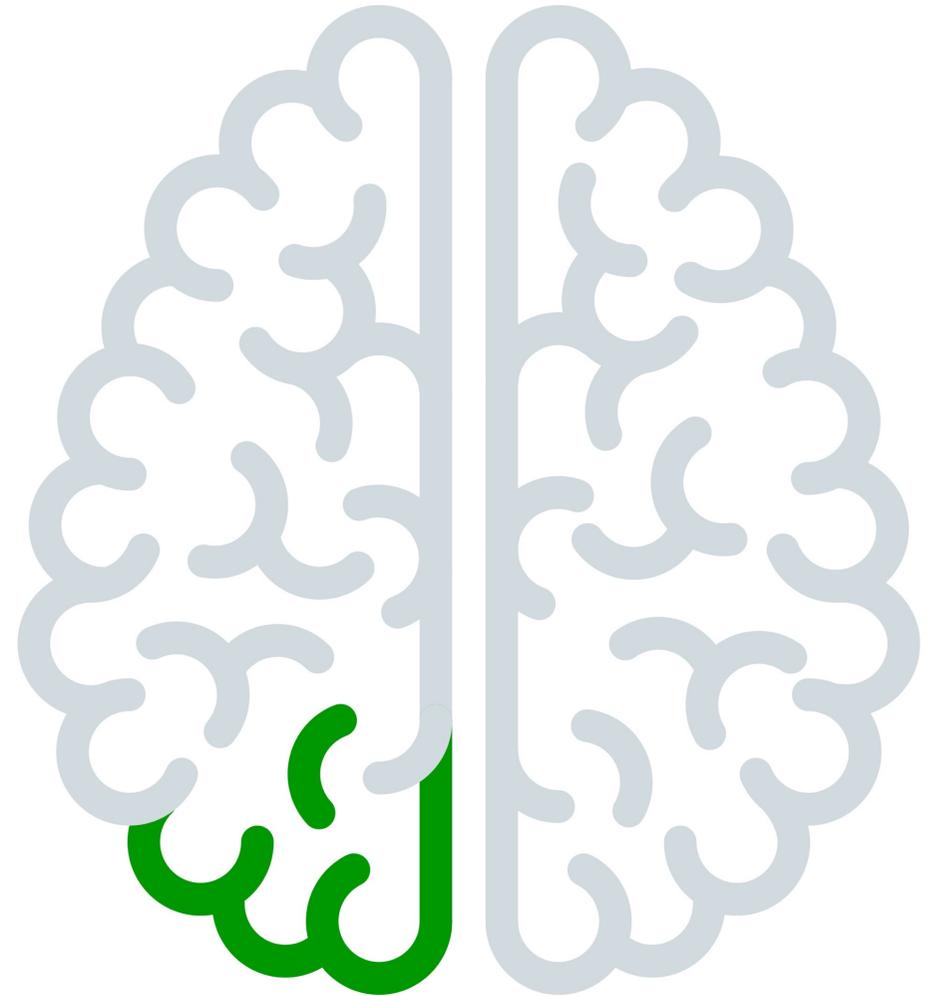


Challenge

One of the seven key behaviours vital for building stronger business teams



Introduction to behaviours

Performance evaluations have historically focused on teams' and individuals' specific functions as defined by the scope of work.

This monitoring of scope-specific performance remains crucial. However, it is also important to consider the human behaviours that help build strong relationships and produce good work.

How behaviours make a difference

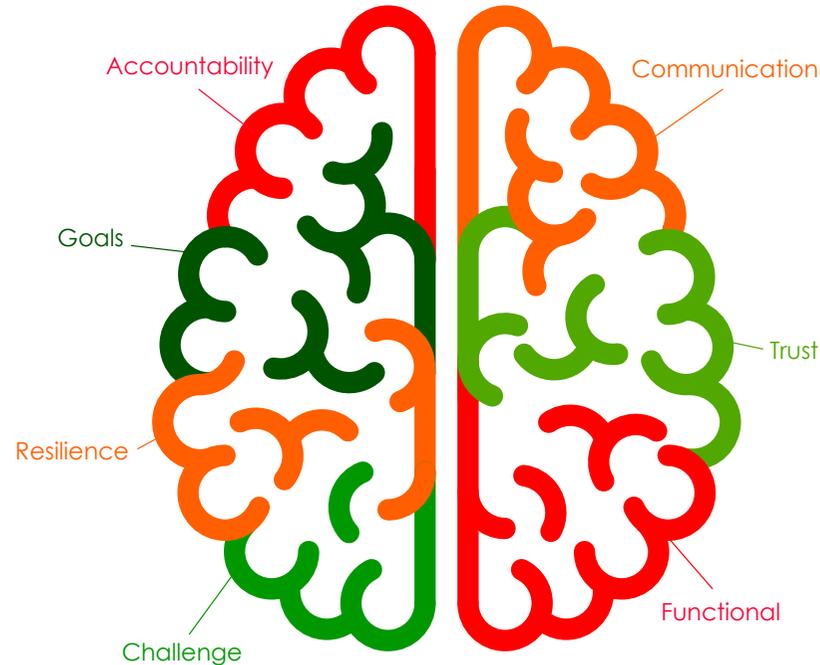
Analysis of our extensive database identified seven key behaviours, shown in the graphic opposite. These behaviours help define what sets the best teams apart from the rest.

Each of the core questions in our database has been assigned to one of these behaviours, allowing us deeper insight into team performance.

Unlike scope-specific disciplines, which can differ depending on the team role, behaviours are common to all.

As these seven behaviours are identical for all job functions, we can directly compare teams in a single relationship or against our broader benchmarks.

In this series of reports we outline the behaviours and their increasing or diminishing impact on team relationships.



What's in this report

We will focus on challenge.

We explain our definition of this behaviour and how it was derived from our database of more than 24,000 evaluations we've conducted over the past 20 years. We compare the top and bottom performers and assess the impact of challenge on overall performance.

Most importantly, this report suggests ways for both agencies and marketers to improve challenge and, in so doing, build stronger relationships with their business partners.

Challenge

'I am convinced that courage is the most important of all the virtues. Because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently.'

Dr. Maya Angelou

Challenge is both noun and verb.

As a noun it can be a call to take part in a contest or competition, while the verb can be an objection or query about the truth of something, often with an implicit demand for proof.

Either way, when viewed in the context of a B2B relationship, it requires some degree of courage to challenge your client, team-mates or superiors.

Our definition of the challenge behaviour revolves around using one's initiative to challenge the status quo and not allowing conflict to go unaddressed. It encompasses a willingness to initiate and adopt change, to think out-of-the-box and to push back when things aren't right.

To foster strong business relationships, teams need to constantly challenge themselves and each other to do better.

Needless to say, challenge does not mean conflict. In fact when it comes to team dynamics, it means the opposite.

The question of whether it is more effective for team members to openly disagree with one another was among those considered by a group of psychologists from Carnegie Mellon, M.I.T. and Union College back in 2008.

In an effort to find out what distinguishes better teams, they conducted research¹ among 699 people.

The researchers eventually concluded that what distinguished the 'good' teams from dysfunctional groups was how team-mates treated one another.

If one needs to challenge a client or team-mate, it must be done with thoughtfulness and respect. Depending on the nature and severity, it might be best handled in private.

The simple guiding rule is that any challenge should intend a positive outcome – whether it's an agency challenging the media establishment to innovate or a marketer who resists peers and superiors who try to quell the creative flame.



¹ [Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups](#), Anita Williams Woolley et al.

How challenge has changed

When it comes to client-agency relationships, it is important to understand how challenge has changed relative to other behaviours and to overall relationship scores.

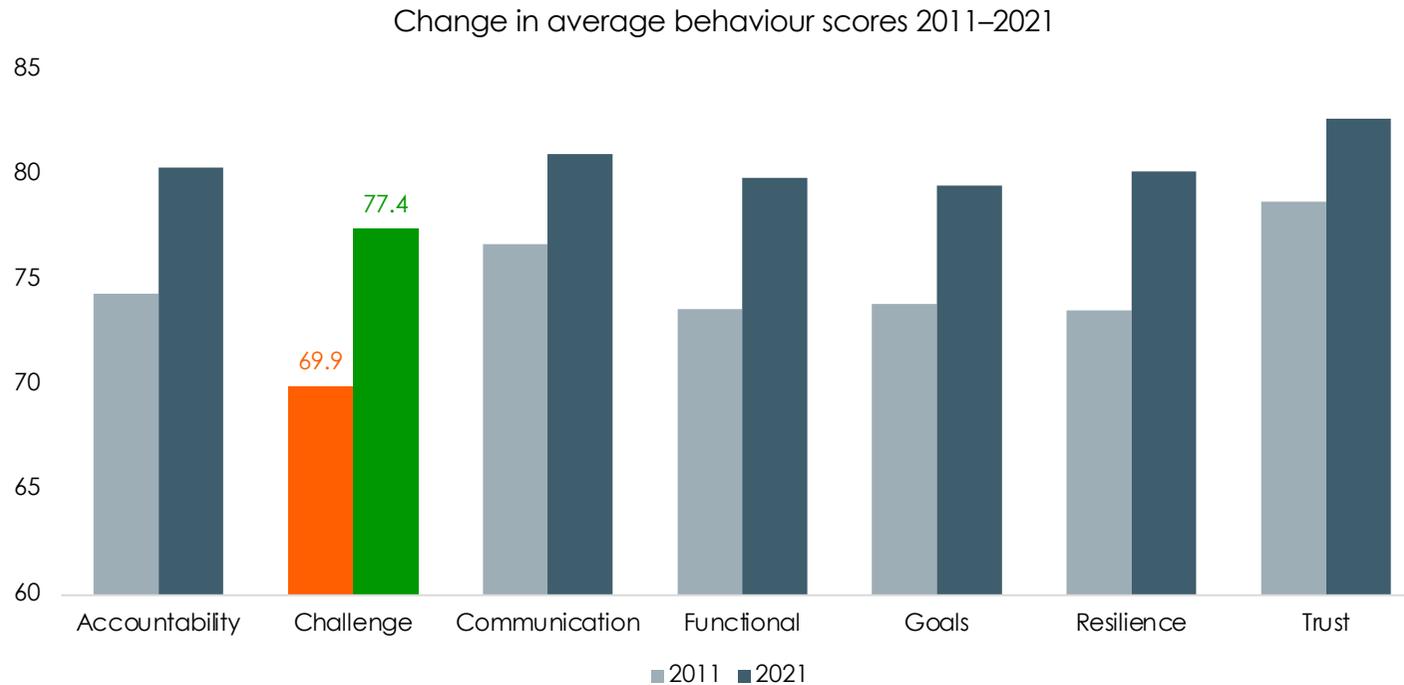
Over the past 10 years, we have seen steady increases in the average evaluation scores given by marketer and agency of each other.

With this in mind, we wondered how each of the seven behaviours has changed over the same 10-year period.

The chart below shows the change in average behaviour scores of all teams (marketer and agency). Positive changes are evident, albeit to different degrees, for each of the behaviours.

Scores for challenge improved by 11% from 70 in 2011 to 77 in 2021.

This is the largest increase among all the behaviours over the decade, indicating that challenge has become more demanded of both agencies and their marketer clients.



The best versus the rest

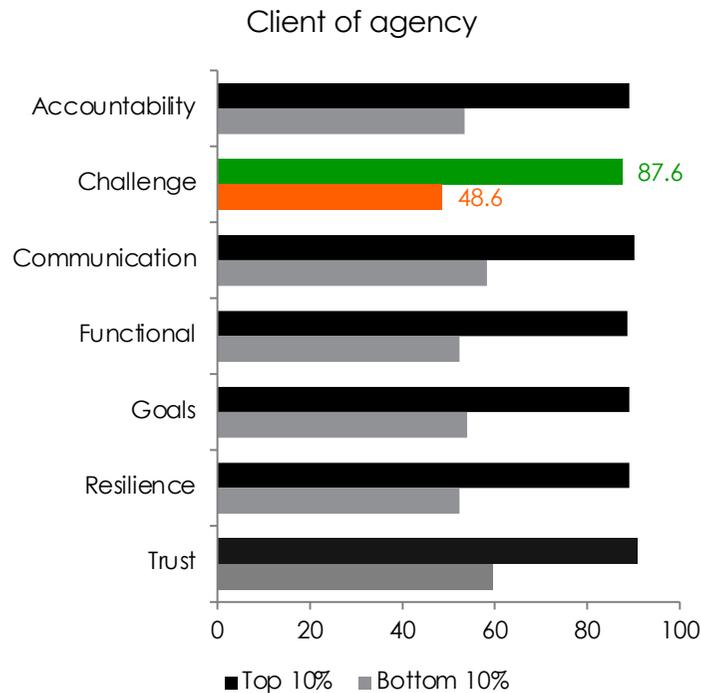
By identifying the clients and agencies with the top 10% scores in our database, and comparing their profiles with those of the bottom 10%, we can pinpoint where they differ and define the strengths of the top performers. This analysis shows that those who perform best overall score very highly for trust.

The charts below reveal the different profiles (top 10% versus the bottom 10%). The gap between the two indicates the potential for poor performers to improve.

Compared with all other behaviours, challenge presents a special opportunity for weaker agencies to close the gap with their top-performing peers.

The client score of the best agencies is 39 points above the weaker agencies. This is the largest gap among all the behaviours we study.

Marketers too have an opportunity to improve their challenge behaviour by closing a 33-point gap to their best-performing counterparts.



Just how important is challenge?

We have also analysed the impact of each behaviour on the overall evaluation – in other words, the priority for improvement.

This helps teams identify which behaviours to focus on.

Based on a correlation analysis across our database, the tables opposite show the behaviours ranked in terms of how they influence the overall relationship scores for the best (top 10%) and the worst (bottom 10%) performers.

In most cases, and not surprisingly, the fundamental ability to do the job (functional) ranks as the most influential behaviour.

For the agency evaluation of a client, the ranking of challenge is unremarkable, as the lowest-ranked behaviour among both the top 10% and bottom 10%.

For agencies, challenge actually drops from 3 to 7. Could this be because some clients don't welcome the push-back?

It is important to note that each of these behaviours plays an indispensable role in building stronger relationships.

Agency scores client		
Rank	Bottom 10%	Top 10%
1	Communication	Functional
2	Functional	Communication
3	Resilience	Trust
4	Trust	Resilience
5	Accountability	Accountability
6	Goals	Goals
7	Challenge	Challenge

Client scores agency		
Rank	Bottom 10%	Top 10%
1	Functional	Functional
2	Resilience	Accountability
3	Challenge	Resilience
4	Accountability	Goals
5	Goals	Trust
6	Trust	Communication
7	Communication	Challenge

How to improve your challenge scores

The root of any team evaluation is the questions that are asked. Assembling and phrasing these questions in collaboration with our clients is both an art and a science.

By analysing the impact specific questions have on evaluation scores we can identify actions that can be taken to improve aspects of a business relationship.

The lists below indicate what agencies and marketers can do to improve their challenge.

What agencies should do

1. Show initiative to anticipate the client's needs, problems and opportunities.
2. Challenge other communication partners to explore new communication opportunities and business initiatives.
3. Develop innovative strategies for existing and new contact points.
4. Display respectful courage to challenge the client with well-supported views.
5. Stay ahead of trends to enable the application of evolving media and technology-driven opportunities to meet consumer habits.

What marketers should do

1. Be bold and resist the temptation to take the safe option.
2. Stay open-minded and accept innovative ideas.
3. Defend the agency team and its ideas internally.
4. Have the courage to manage conflict proactively.
5. Accept criticism when briefs are inadequate and mobilise to improve them when necessary.

In conclusion

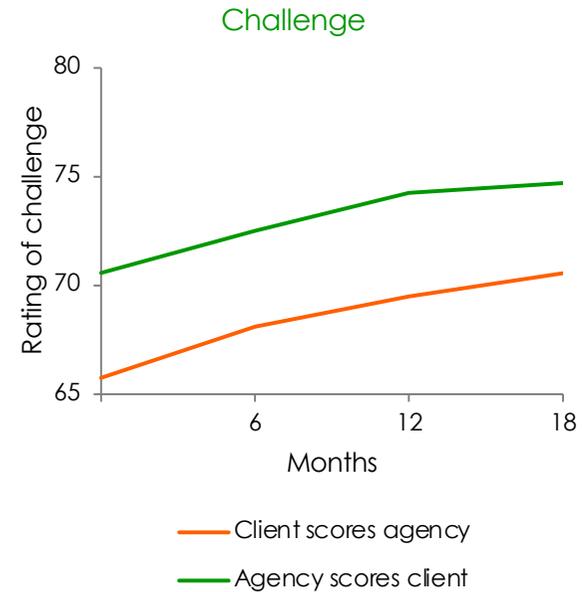
Along with the other behaviours we have identified, challenge is an important aspect for teams to acknowledge and to improve.

To repeat the quote of the revered American poet Dr. Maya Angelou ‘...without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently’.

Challenge, in a business context, requires courage. This is particularly so in cultures where a master-servant relationship with suppliers and subordinates is a business normal.

Yet our data shows that both marketers and agencies are crying out for more challenging behaviour from each other. There is a significant opportunity for poor-performing marketers and agencies to close the gap on their better-performing peers by improving their levels of challenge.

Our data shows that clear improvements in challenge scores are possible just 18 months from the introduction of a formalised, objective and regular evaluation process with Aprais.



This series

This report is one of a series focusing on team behaviours.

Each report focuses on one of the seven behaviours we measure:

1. Accountability
2. Challenge
3. Communication
4. Functional
5. Goals
6. Resilience
7. Trust

About Aprais

We are the global pioneers in building stronger business relationships.

Since we established the category 20+ years ago we have advised the world's leading marketers and agencies on more than 24,000 relationships, across 92 countries, in 13 languages.

This has enabled us to build a large bank of data that allows companies to accurately compare their business relationships with those of their peers.

Contact and follow us

Request a demo: carolina.motta@aprais.com

Request a free consultation for
your organisation: aprais@aprais.com

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