Choosing Media Strategically for Team Communications

Most teams figure out how to talk about and negotiate their preferences around the use of different communications media - e-mail, telephone, voice mail, etc. These preferences are based on a range of legitimate factors including habits, previous experience, cognitive style, talent, and ease of access. Considering cross-cultural issues requires thinking about time-zones and language issues (ease of speaking v. writing, reading v. listening in a second language).

But too many teams fail to consider key qualities of different media in their choices about when and how to use the full range of communications channels available to them. It's not enough to find a comfortable place where team preferences overlap.

It's important to remember that all communications technologies are "media" with all the attendant implications for choosing one over another for a particular purpose based on the effect you need and want. Teams that can diversify their communications repertoire to use different media consciously to achieve different effects at different times are more powerful.

Consider media differences in terms of the degree to which a medium is personal, warm/cold, urgent, novel, fast/slow. The team needs requisite variety - change modes for refreshment and impact.

Experiment and pay attention to how different media impacts team dynamics.

Media	Effect on Team Dynamics
Electronic mail	What norms need to be established for things like; response time, whether or not e-mail can be forwarded to others? What norms are important about who gets copied on e-mail messages and whether or not these are blind copies? How does the style of e-mail messages influence how people feel about the team?
Decision Making Support Systems	How does the ability to contribute anonymous input affect the team? How can you continue to test whether "consensus" as defined by computer processing of input is valid?
Audio (telephone) conferencing	How can you help participants have a sense of who is "present?" How can you sense when people have something to say so you can make sure that everyone has a chance to be heard?
Video Conferencing	How can you best manage the attention span of participants? Where can video add something you can't get with audio-only?
Asynchronous web- conferencing	How do you deal with conflict when everyone is participating at different times? What's the virtual equivalent of eye contact? What metaphors will help you help participants create the mental map they need to build a culture which will support the team process?
Document sharing	How can you balance the need to access and process large amounts of information with the goal of developing relationships and affective qualities like trust?

Avoiding Unnecessary Communication Gaps

If a team is co-located, problems caused by miscommunication can be solved easily in person. If I send you an e-mail and you don't respond, I'm usually aware if it's because you are on travel. If you're around, it doesn't feel like a big deal to ask you about it when we run into each other in the hall or I can stop by your office and say, "Hey, you haven't responded, what's happening?"

In a distributed team, when I don't get a response from you to my e-mail, it could be for any of the following reasons;

- You're away from your computer and haven't received it.
- Something went wrong technically and you didn't actually receive it.
- You don't understand what I was trying to say.

- You think my message was really stupid and don't know how to tell me.
- You're angry at me for some reason I don't know.
- You wish I would stop bothering you with what you think are trivial matters.
- You're totally overloaded at the moment and just haven't gotten to it yet.
- You didn't think the message required (or merited) a response.

The tendency in people who are already feeling tenuous about their relationship (something which is particularly true of a new, distributed team) is to assume the worst case explanation and to be reluctant to pursue the issue for fear of appearing insecure or silly. Making a call or sending more messages to follow up feels less casual and so individuals are less likely to do it and misunderstandings are left out there to undermine the feelings of trust and security necessary to good team performance.

To avoid this kind of communication gap, make some agreements among the team about norms for response in various media (e-mail, phone messages, voice mail, fax) - both how the receipt of a message will be acknowledged and what you can expect from each other in terms of a response. If you can't respond substantively right away, at least let people know immediately that you've received the message and when they can expect a response. "Thanks for your message" can go a long way toward developing a friendly team culture. Develop a system for alerting each other ahead of time if you will be disappearing from the communications grid for more than a day or two so everyone else will know what to expect.

Avoiding Communication Burn-Out and Boredom

Before we had all this electronic media, most organizations were a "memo" culture. Every day, memos arrived in the in-box covering the full range of topics from critical information about competitive strategy to mundane matters like holiday schedules. After a while, everybody stopped reading them. "Why didn't you get your budget figures in on time? Didn't you read the memo?" was not an uncommon refrain. E-mail has become today's memo. And, if anything, the problem is worse because it's so easy to send, copy, and forward e-mail. Communication is so critical for a distributed team that it is essential to take steps to avoid becoming bored with it.

Economy of scale is not always desirable. There are some messages which convey more powerfully and effectively one-on-one. Even though it's possible to send a single e-mail or memo to everyone on the team, you can get a big payoff from calling each team member individually from time to time so that you can interact with them in real time about what they think about something. It takes more time but it gives you a more "unprocessed" response and they may bring up issues which would have been lost otherwise.

Switch media for greater impact. If you have monthly telephone conference calls for your team to report on project status, have them write up reports for a beautifully printed team newsletter for a change. If e-mail is the primary mode of interaction, leave a voice mail which will convey the emotional tone and character of a message. Whatever team preferences are for your basic communications infrastructure, be sure that you spice it up by using alternate media creatively.

Encourage communication within the network of team members. The bulk of team communications in a distributed team is usually either with the whole-group or between one member and the team leader. Co-located teams benefit from having many opportunities for pairs or small groups of team members to interact with each other. Developing these relationships is satisfying and fun. It builds up social capital among the team which enhances team performance because members feel more comfortable with each other and are more aware of each others' strengths. In a distributed team, you need to be conscious about creating reasons for team members to communicate with each other in every possible combination. For example, you could pair up team members to work on a problem together and report back to the group - just as you would have in "break-out" groups at a face-to-face meeting.

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