

## **Developing the Team's Communications Strategy**

The biggest issue for virtual (distributed) teams is communications. A critical task for team leaders is to engage your team in creating (and continuing to review and revise) an effective communications strategy.

How can we create and follow a communications strategy for our team which adds value rather than creating overload? Too much communication about the wrong things is just as problematic as too little communication about important things.

***What, when (and how much) are we going to communicate?***

***Where and how will we communicate? (what media will we use?)***

***Who will play what roles in the team's communications?***

One way to start developing a communications strategy is to look at the nature of the different kinds of work the team will be doing and what kind of communication is needed to support that work.

There is a continuum which describes how individuals (or sub-groups) on the team are working from autonomously to interdependently. For example, there may be some tasks unique to a specific country which team members can do on their own without interacting with anyone else on the team. Other product-related projects may require more collaboration among team members in different parts of the region.

Another continuum can describe whether the patterns of our work - the problems, the tasks, the day-to-day activities - are repetitive and routine, whether these patterns are changing, or whether new patterns are emerging.

The nature of communications among the team about different parts of the work - including the frequency, the volume, and the degree of interactivity - is different depending on where that work falls in the matrix.

### **TeamWork Matrix**

	<i>What are the communications norms we need?</i>	
	<i>When we are working ...</i>	
	<b>Autonomously</b>	<b>Interdependently</b>
<i>When patterns of work are ...</i>  <b>Emerging</b>		
  <b>Routine</b>		

**What kinds of tasks fall into each quadrant? Therefore, what kinds of communications norms do we need?**

**routine/autonomous**

To the extent team members are working autonomously on tasks which remain static, there is little need for a lot of cross-team communications.

Communications should be: Minimalist. Local. Compliance oriented where necessary. Automated whenever possible.

The danger for virtual teams is that the "disconnected" feeling of a distributed team sometimes leads to over-reporting as a strategy to give people the feeling of "knowing what's going on." Sometime team members generate a lot of reporting in order to make sure the team leader "knows" that they are working. This kind of communication creates sludge in the team's arteries. It is a common cause of information overload which can sometimes result in team members avoiding engaging in the communications which actually are important to the team.

The team needs to agree on a strategy to defend itself against communication sludge! Be on the lookout for what can be eliminated.

## **routine/interdependent**

Team members need to provide enough information to each other about areas where their routine work is interdependent to enable them to coordinate.

Communications should be: Standardized. Organized. Easy. "Pull" v. "Push" (You go get what you need when you need it rather than having it pushed at you automatically).

The danger for virtual teams is that because we have technology which allows us to exchange and store large amounts of information, we do it because we *can* without really addressing whether doing it adds value.

The team needs to agree on a strategy to manage and coordinate this communication. Choose a few, processes for exchanging critical information and make a commitment to sticking to agreements about when and what will be produced by each member of the team.

## **emerging/autonomous**

When individuals (or sub groups) on the team notice changes emerging in the work they have been doing, it's critical to make this "intelligence" available to the team as a whole.

Communications should be: Timely (it can't wait for the next face-to-face meeting). "Push" v. "Pull" (to make sure that nobody misses a key indicator).

The danger for distributed teams is that a weak communications strategy results in missing signals where something new happening in one place is a bell weather for something that will sooner or later have an effect on other parts of the system. A team that doesn't share this kind of intelligence is less than the sum of its parts.

The team needs a strategy for scanning, scouting the environment within which they are operating, noticing pattern changes to make sure that important things get up on the team's radar screen soon enough when something which has been static starts changing. But it's not enough to simply report the information, it's critical that the whole team have an opportunity to discuss its meaning.

## **emerging/interdependent**

When members of a team can work together on developing strategies to respond to changing conditions you get the biggest payoff for having teams. This is where the team becomes more than the sum of its parts.

Communications should be: Rich. Conversational. Continuous. Involve everyone.

The danger for distributed teams is that their communications in this area become disjointed because the team lacks the environment to support substantive, ongoing (between face-to-face meetings) discussions. New skills are required to engage with each other effectively at different times from different places.

This is where the team should spend the bulk of its communications resources (time, energy, supporting technology). A team that does this well can become a complex adaptive system which creates strategies, processes, and new approaches flexibly in response to changing conditions (politics, competition, new products).

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The team leader's role shifts as the team works in different quadrants of the matrix.

**Leader's Role in Virtual Team's Communications**

	Autonomously	Interdependently
Emerging	3. Lookout	4. Facilitator
Routine	1. Defender	2. Manager

- Defender: Be a buffer between your team and the rest of the organization. Defend the team against unnecessary and overloading reporting requirements. Make sure that the team isn't generating excess information because you're not present enough to make them feel confident that you know what's going on.
- Manager: This is where you need to exercise classic management techniques for coordination. Help the team develop habits to make these processes run smoothly and reliably.
- Lookout: You need to be a "lookout" - constantly scanning the landscape of the team looking for indicators of problems and changes. Sometimes people call the role in this quadrant that of "helicopter" management because you kind of hover above the fray and then can swoop down as needed. Just as team members need to be watching for indicators of change within their view, you need to do the same with your view of the larger organization within which the teams are operating.
- Facilitator: This is where you have the opportunity to add the most value. This is the most difficult quadrant of activity because it requires significant collaboration and engagement. You need to facilitate the processes through which the conversations that matter will happen. This role could also be thought of as "producer" - you need to bring together all the key players and make sure that each

is contributing effectively to the collective just as a theatrical producer pulls together the director, actors, technical experts to create the whole drama.

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