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Team Communication in the Workplace

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In today's organizations, team and group communication is an essential part of work, and it is loaded with expectations. Despite the expectation that teamwork offers an answer to the intense demands of today's dynamic, ubiquitously digital working life, taking advantage of its benefits is neither simple nor well understood. Teams represent various types of collaboration. Teams can be understood by observing their structures, practices, and processes as well as their functionality and goal achievement. This chapter provides an understanding of the multifaceted reality of groups and teams as it manifests in interaction. The chapter analyzes a variety of team phenomena in order to enhance and develop team performance in the workplace. Although teams can have a designated leader or coordinator, team members can also share leadership. Teams can execute long-lasting, permanent tasks, but they can also be formed for short periods to perform explicit, nonrecurring tasks. The chapter also outlines the practical implications of the communication factors that contribute to team performance and goal achievement in the context of constantly changing working life and the manifold requirements of successful teams.

Introduction

Team and group work have become established ways to organize work and respond to the intense demands of the constantly changing context of working life. Knowledge-intensive work in particular is based on collaborative interaction carried out in teams. Here, teams refer to the various work groups in working life. The most common benefits and expectations associated with teamwork are strengthened commitment to work, improved job satisfaction, and organizational savings. Other advantages include a weakening of the workplace's

hierarchical structures, shared authority, higher-quality results, and efficient work rates (Harris & Sherblom 2011). Moreover, teams are often considered a forum for combining or giving rise to various forms of expertise (Kozlowski & Bell 2003). They are expected to provide synergy as well as more innovative outcomes than individuals alone can provide.

Communication in modern working life is at least partly technology-mediated, which allows teams to operate across organizational and geographical borders. Despite the expectation that teamwork represents an answer to the demands of today's dynamic, ubiquitously digital working life, taking advantage of its benefits is neither simple nor well understood (Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen 2015). Successful teams are vital to organizations, but not all teams perform in the same way. Teams exist, perform, and develop based on communication. Analyzing communication is essential to understanding how to reap the best benefits from teams.

There are several perspectives and key assumptions concerning group communication and thus several ways to understand groups or teams (Hollingshead et al. 2005). The aim of this chapter is to review perspectives that could help any member of any type of team to understand teams as complex communicative realities. The chapter provides an understanding of a variety of team phenomena in order to enhance and develop team performance in the workplace.

Understanding Team Communication

In knowledge work, working in teams is an established practice. Teams are usually formed to accomplish a certain goal, function, or project (Lipnack & Stamps 2000, 58). Team members often share a sense of responsibility (Kirkman & Rosen 2000), and every member plays an important part in achieving shared goals (Scott 2013). In team communication, shared meanings are created and roles, norms, and rules are constructed (Hollingshead & Poole

2012). Team members produce the team and its characteristics as well as coordinate their performance in communication. Teams communicate both face-to-face and via several kinds of communication technology, from email and chat to video conferencing tools (Gilson et al. 2015). Teams also use social media, enterprise social media, and other web-based communication platforms in their interaction.

Teams can be geographically or organizationally dispersed (Lipnack & Stamps 2000), but team members also commonly use communication technology when they work at the same physical location (Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim 2012). Communication technologies enable members to communicate asynchronously and synchronously and to use text-based, audio, or video tools in their communication – or all of them at the same time. Communication can also be mobile. Furthermore, multicommutation, in which a person carries out parallel conversations with several individuals at the same time (Valo 2019) is enabled by tools such as instant messaging, social media, and email. The use of all these technologies to communicate in teams has become common or even expected in the workplace (Gilson et al. 2014).

Synergy, knowledge management, the quality of collaborative decisions, and work commitment are advantages of teamwork (Harris & Sherblom 2011). Naturally, teams do not always perform as hoped, and various forms of dysfunction, such as social loafing, misunderstandings, and conflicts, may emerge (Hollingshead et al. 2005). Changes in working life, such as globalization and digitalization, have influenced team communication processes (Foster, Abbey, Callow, Zu, & Wilbon 2015). For example, knowledge sharing can be challenging in global, technology-mediated teams (Zakaria, Amelinck, & Wilemon 2004).

Teams Are Socially Organized Systems

When collaboration is organized on the basis of teams, communication processes and qualities are dependent on various factors, from personal competencies and relationship history to environmental features (Sunwolf 2012). Interpersonal communication is relational, dynamic, and contextual in nature – and as a result, it is frequently convoluted as well (Poole 2014). The greater the number of people involved in team interaction, the greater the number of relationships involved and the higher the likelihood that conflicting goals will arise. More coordination will also be required for effective collaboration to occur (Hollingshead et al. 2005). That is, building trust and making decisions are typically easier when only two people are involved than in groups comprising five (or more) members. Viewing teams as self-organizing social systems is the key to understanding team communication (Poole 2014).

Teams form internal social structures, such as boundaries, norms, and roles, on the basis of their communication (Hollingshead et al. 2005). They do so to manage team communication, both consciously and unconsciously. Accordingly, a team's existing social structures guide its communication (Fulk & McGrath 2005); for example, the team leader routinely opens and conducts team discussions. Structuration means that teams create, maintain, confirm, and shape their social structures in communication. Structures are created and maintained on a collective basis. Team members are also active agents in structuration processes, and their individual goals influence team structures. (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee 1996.) Team members use their previous experiences with structuration. However, the attempt to transfer well-functioning structures, such as meeting practices, from previous teams to a new team may not be automatically beneficial, because every team creates and confirms its own communicative routines. Structuration has multifaceted connections to team communication (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson 2008), and recognizing them can shed light on how and why a given team functions in the way it does.

The use of communication technology can be part of a team's structuration (Kim 2018). Communication technology provides the basis for certain communication practices, such as document sharing and the collaborative production of documents (Rains & Bonito 2017). However, team members can both shape the ways communication technology is used and, conversely, adapt their communication practices – such as taking turns and choosing discussion topics – to conform to a certain communication technology (and to the needs of the team). For instance, members can decide what kinds of chats, conference platforms, intranet spaces, enterprise social networking, or other technological forums and tools are appropriate for their communication goals. If the members have enough authority and competence to make such decisions, they can also select norms that fit the chosen technologies. However, norms often develop unconsciously, and it takes time for them to become established. Adaptation to the use of communication technology may bring new norms established elsewhere. In contrast, although a team may have developed a norm of showing support by using symbols in the chat box, this norm may not be adopted by a new team. Team members can play an active role in reshaping communication norms and practices.

Another important perspective on team communication views teams as open social systems that consist of several interdependent inputs, processes, and outputs (Poole 2014). Inputs are, for example, the individual team members' competencies, agendas, and contexts. Producing norms, task performance, and developing and maintaining cohesion and trust are examples of communication processes. Processes can produce tangible outputs, such as products, services, and new ideas (Mathieu et al. 2008).

Additionally, team communication often results in communicative outputs, such as competence, trust, and cohesion, which in turn become available as inputs for further team processes. Team communication can result in several outcomes that are not reducible to their

inputs, and team communication evolves over time. Thus, teams should not be viewed only as a fixed set of components or at a certain point in time. For example, forming a team of experts does not automatically guarantee success. Both the collective history of a team and its members' individual experiences are important elements affecting team communication (Hollingshead et al. 2005).

Seeing team communication as systemic illuminates why certain components alone do not guarantee the success of a team. The success or failure of a team is commonly explained by recourse to a particular element, such as leadership, communication technology, or the diversity of team members. However, the causes are not always so clear. Instead, any kind of interaction, such as arguing, can either improve, stabilize, or deteriorate a team's performance. Viewing teams as complex systems consisting of interdependent, dynamic elements (Poole 2014) offers a broader understanding and emphasizes team communication. Instead of focusing on only one element, such as a certain type of expertise or communication platform, it is more beneficial to scrutinize what happens in team communication and develop strategies for adjusting to it.

To conclude, teams differ, and the communication they pursue can have different emphases. It is important to recognize that as teams fulfill various kinds of goals in various contexts, many forms of communication can be appropriate: There is no epitome of team success. Instead, there might be several effective solutions for certain situations or for a certain team. The important thing is to understand that team communication is a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon and that the factors related to communication processes and outcomes are not reversible.

Team Communication Is Dynamic

Team communication is inherently dynamic, and it is affected by several important factors. This section presents such factors in order to explain team processes and why teams do or do not succeed.

Membership and Leadership

Teams can be formed in many ways. The initial reason for forming a team can originate from an organization, a certain project, a customer, or the team itself. Team membership is not limited to a certain workplace, physical location, or time. Team composition may include members from separate organizations and stakeholders. Changes in membership involving one or several members at the same time (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Donsbach, & Alliger 2014) can complicate the team's composition. Team members can represent a broad variety of expertise, backgrounds, values, and interests. Global organizations are involved in alliances and joint ventures, and the provider and the customer, or another end user, might belong to the same cross-boundary team (Ahmad & Lutters 2015). The duration of a team can vary from a long-term period to a short, project-based period: A member might belong to the same team for years or months, take part in a new team immediately after another team disbands, visit a team sporadically, or be a member of several teams at the same time and have either the same or different roles in those teams. Because memberships are manifold, team boundaries and composition are permeable (Putnam, Stohl, & Baker 2012).

The diversity of teams can cause faultlines that split a team into cliques or subgroups (Lau & Murnighan 1998). Knowledge-based faultlines, which divide teams according to knowledge and expertise, can be especially problematic: If members find common ground in terms of their expertise or experience only with certain individuals, the team cannot function fully as a team, which can cause poor performance (Georgakakis, Greve, & Ruigrok 2017).

Communicative roles are given and assumed via communication, as members receive implicit or explicit feedback regarding their communication behavior and begin to reinforce certain behaviors accordingly (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Beck, & Kauffeld 2016). Roles can be both functional and dysfunctional in terms of team performance and member satisfaction. In team meetings, the emergent roles of facilitators, solution seekers, and problem analysts are seen as positive, whereas those of complainers and the indifferent can be dysfunctional (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2016).

Leadership occurs in all kinds of teams, and like team membership, it can be structured and can emerge in a multitude of ways. Either a member or someone operating from outside the team can lead it. Leadership may be enacted from an organizationally appointed position or by one or several people emergently taking on leadership responsibilities through communication. Team leadership is often approached as a set of functions that a leader must ensure in order to foster team success. The leader must identify the needs of the team and aid the team in satisfying them (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam 2010). The functions of team leadership include motivating team members, facilitating the team's planning, or setting an example for desired team behavior. Relational communication, such as listening to team members and offering social support, is important in team leadership (Graça & Passos 2015). Both task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership predict team effectiveness (Burke et al. 2006).

Shared leadership is often viewed as a solution for teams facing increased competition and rapid changes and as a source of "collective wisdom" (Salas, Rosen, Burke, & Goodwin 2009). Shared leadership is a relational and collaborative leadership process (Koccolowski 2010) and involves distributing the leadership functions to several or all team members. It can also mean allowing leaders to emerge, for example, based on their expertise. Shared leadership is an important predictor of effectiveness (Pearce & Sims 2002). Successfully

shared leadership requires high-quality communication processes, such as negotiating shared goals and structures of work, communicating trust, an active endeavor to reduce misunderstandings and solve conflicts, as well as active encouragement of differing views in problem-solving and decision-making (Kocolowski 2010).

Especially in long-term teams, members' needs for leadership may change as the team develops or as the tasks, relationships, competencies, or even organizational ideals of leadership change. Members of new teams are often reliant on a designated leader to provide direction and safety in communication when they undertake new assignments and relationships (Wheelan, Davidson, & Tilin 2003). Shared leadership is often seen as beneficial for more mature teams. It may be challenging, because conflicts over roles and power may emerge over time (Nicolaidis et al. 2014). However, the desire and ability to share leadership may develop over time as well, as members learn effective collaboration with and from each other (Salas et al. 2009).

Goals Guide Team Communication

Despite the variety of team types, they all share the basic function of accomplishing goals (Hollingshead et al. 2005). Goals can be long-term, broadly or narrowly defined, or abstract, and they often determine the basic function of the team. For example, the goal of a production team could be to develop a product or model for a certain purpose with well-defined details, or to generate new products more generally. Goals can also be set for the purposes of a particular meeting; the goal of a cooperative team's first meeting could be to familiarize members with one another. Irrespective of the defined goals, teams can produce other relevant or unexpected outcomes, such as well-being. Goals are set and executed in communication.

Interaction tasks – such as decision-making, problem-solving, planning, generating ideas, and providing social support – indicate the way in which teams communicate in order to achieve their goals (Zigurs & Buckland 1998). In the literature, the terms tasks and task-orientation often refer to assignments and responsibilities, and they are used to distinguish communication related to such responsibilities from nontask or relationship-oriented team communication. Here, the term interaction task is used to describe all the tasks that teams fulfill in their communication. Tasks can have different emphases: Whereas some are more important and last longer, others have less relevance and emerge for only a short period of time. Tasks are an essential part of what happens in team communication in certain situations, such as meetings (Zigurs & Buckland 1998).

Tasks can be a defining characteristic of teams and a behavioral requirement for accomplishing stated goals (Zigurs & Buckland 1998). Project teams, top management teams, and product development teams are only a few examples of teams named according to their basic functions, which also guide team interaction. However, teams actually execute a wide variety of interaction tasks, and teams can accomplish several tasks simultaneously (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro 2001).

Decision-making, one of the key interaction tasks, entails negotiation processes to find a solution to an issue identified as problematic. Various small- and large-scale decisions are made every day, from scheduling entire projects to deciding when to take a break during a meeting. Good decision-making is often understood as a cost-effective, normative, formal process of rational choices made by informed individuals (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld 2005). Ideally, a team should first conduct a thorough analysis of the problem at hand and then establish the criteria for an acceptable choice, generate a set of possible solutions, and finally, critically analyze the consequences of each potential solution (Hollingshead et al. 2005).

When a team makes joint decisions, groupthink may arise. Groupthink (Janis 1972) refers to the social pressure to establish consensus, and the overt protection of group cohesion – a sense of belongingness and connection within a group – and can lead to ill-informed and uncritical decision-making. To prevent groupthink, a team may ensure critical evaluation collectively or delegate to a member the role of critical evaluator. This is especially important in decision-making regarding complex, multidimensional assignments with many possible solutions (Orlitzky & Hirokawa 2001). Fruitful dissent can also be encouraged by a leader (Tourish 2014). Speaking out and considering differing views can boost team creativity and innovation and prevent groupthink (DeDreu & West 2001).

Another central task is sensemaking, which can be related to problems, decisions, or goals.

Sensemaking is a jointly produced attempt to understand the issues at hand and how they are situated within the past, the present, and the future of the team (Weick et al. 2005).

Sensemaking may occur, for example, when a team pauses in the midst of decision-making to discuss their previous knowledge or the goals of the decision-making process, that is, to make sense of the situation. Sometimes sensemaking does not unfold in a rational fashion. For example, dramatizations, such as repeatedly shared stories, anecdotes, and inside jokes (Bormann 1996) can be useful tools for building a shared understanding of decisions, their possible consequences, and the team's competence (Horila 2017). Although dramatizing can seem like a time-consuming, tangential form of communication, it can be a rather powerful way to make sense of multifaceted issues. Diverging stories and interpretations can boost creativity and critical evaluation (Zanin, Hoelscher, & Kramer 2016). Sometimes, instead of reaching for a finite solution, it is more important to reach a shared understanding of a problem – its parts and possible consequences – or to make sure that team members feel heard in a discussion. A shared understanding of important team tasks and processes is

important for team effectiveness. For example, a similar understanding of the scope and requirements of a problem is vital to team coordination and performance (Matteson 2015).

Certain kinds of communication tasks should fit a certain kind of team and a certain kind of goal. Moreover, communication technologies should be chosen to suit tasks (Zigurs & Khazanchi 2008). Difficult and complex tasks require communication technology that offers as rich a form of communication as possible as well as tools for information processing. If completing a task needs increased synergy and trust in a team, a communication technology that enables seeing team members' faces and hearing their voices would likely be suitable (Zigurs & Khazanchi 2008).

Evaluating Team Communication

The ability to recognize, reflect on, and evaluate team communication is an essential part of team competence (Berry 2011). In fact, evaluation is a requirement for team development. Even though all teams strive for success, criteria and aims that guide evaluation naturally differ. Evaluation can be focused on outcomes and achievements (Greenbaum & Query 1999) as well as processes, performance, and communication (Mathieu et al. 2008). The context and team habits should be taken into consideration when evaluating team communication (Mathieu et al. 2008). Team members, the organization, or even customers can evaluate teams.

In organizations, team evaluation is often seen as something measurable. However, evaluating team communication in order to develop the team requires thorough reflection on the communication processes. Viewing team structures and teams as systems may shed light on how important it is to see team communication as situational, contextual, and dynamic. Evaluation should be focused on the factors needing improvement, and the focus should guide the criteria of evaluation. For example, if the team is not innovative enough, it could be

beneficial to reflect on what kind of culture the team has or if the members trust each other to make out-of-the-box suggestions. In this kind of situation, evaluating only team outcomes would not help the team improve its communication. Instead of setting the goal of being more innovative, the team would probably benefit from paying attention to its idea-generating practices.

Team success does not always indicate that team interaction is entirely of high quality or even mediocre. A team can also achieve its goals by chance, by deciding to ignore potentially emerging problems, or as a result of excellent leadership. The full potential of teams – including work commitment, relational satisfaction, and well-being – is not always fully realized. Sometimes the commitment to achieving organizational goals shown by team members is so strong that other goals, such as solving relational conflicts, receive less emphasis or are even ignored.

One way to evaluate team communication is to analyze how the team itself perceives it. Team efficacy is a team's perception of its ability to achieve objectives (Porter 2005), and it is a predictor of actual performance (Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien 2002). This means that if team members believe they will succeed in accomplishing their tasks, they will actually perform better than they would if they lacked confidence (Bandura 1997; Hardin, Fuller, & Davidson 2007). Team efficacy is based on the assumption that in team communication, members will share, form, and modify knowledge about their tasks and processes, and thus the team's collective perception of its ability to succeed is relevant (Joe, Tsai, Lin, & Liu 2014). In the digital context, team efficacy is a team's perception of its ability to be successful in a distributed environment (Fuller, Hardin, & Davidson 2006). It is important to be aware of and reflect on efficacy in teams.

Practical Implications

Teams should be encouraged to reflect on and evaluate their communication. Analyzing what kinds of communication practices guide them and how and why those practices are created and maintained facilitates the understanding of team communication. Evaluation requires resources – time and competence, among others.

It is impossible to observe all the processes and phenomena of team communication at a certain point in time. This limitation needs to be acknowledged. However, in practice, reflecting on team communication regularly during teamwork and talking about problems and dysfunctional practices are reasonable courses of action. It is equally important to evaluate team communication as a whole instead of focusing only on outcomes.

It may be unreasonable to expect team communication to be cost-efficient, straightforward, or even rational at all times. Relational communication is needed to build relationships, but it is also a way to construct team identity, increase cohesion, or boost creativity. Instead of trying to limit sidetrack discussion, both members and leaders may benefit from allowing it. Sidetracks can in fact play an important role in team communication. Furthermore, achieving organizational goals do not always fulfill the needs that team members have for well-being or contentment. Practically, the ability to support wellness requires resources from the team and the organization, that is, time, competence, and the authority to recognize needs and act according to the team's dynamic needs.

The needs and best practices of membership and leadership are often team-specific, and they may change over time. A new team may be best led with authority, but it may later benefit from shared leadership. Sometimes a team may need to transition from shared leadership to having a single person assume responsibility. It is thus important that the procedures of shared or centralized leadership are regularly negotiated among team leaders and members.

Team members should also have the opportunity to take part in the selection of communication technologies and, if necessary, enough authority to change the chosen technologies or the ways they are used.

Understanding working-life team communication in practice requires the recognition that teams can have different kinds of goals and that these goals need different kinds of communication practices. Team goals should guide the evaluation of teams. Not all teamwork can or needs to be successful in all respects, and not every team can have all the resources needed for ideal teamwork. Teams are never complete or permanent.

What to consider in the workplace:

- It should be acknowledged that teams are not all alike and that there is no one best way to engage in teamwork. Various norms and other social structures guide the team's communication, but the team can shape the ways it engages in interaction.
- The practices of leadership and membership can be negotiated regularly. Both team leaders and members are capable of changing and renewing the practices.
- The team's interaction tasks should be seen in relation to different levels of needs. The team should be aware of the possible differences between the goals set by the organization, the team, and the individual team members.
- Evaluating team communication takes time but is worthwhile. The team should have the capacities (authority, time, competence) to modify its performance when necessary.
- Communication technology should be suitable for the team and its goals and needs. The team members need to take part in discussions about what communication tools are chosen and adjusted.

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