

## Improving Team Performance: Communication and Collaboration

### Overview

Poor communication is the primary contributor to less than optimal team performance. One would think that technological advancements would help improve communication within an organization—laterally, horizontally, and vertically. Yet, communication problems in even the smallest of teams arise because participants do not give enough attention at the outset to this critical element of team performance.

Communication problems can arise from several sources: the sender, the receiver, the physical infrastructures and mechanisms through which communications are conveyed, the expectations of stakeholders, the content of the communication itself, and the complexity of the environment through which the communication is transmitted, filtered, interpreted, and understood. Haney (1979) noted, “Everything we experience is a manufacture of our nervous system” (p. 55), thus the communications that we receive and send are one’s perceptions of reality and not necessarily the truth.

People are complex, information-processing systems that “can do only one or a few things at a time, and that can attend to only a small part of the information in memory and presented by the environment” (March & Simon, 1958, p. 11). Haney (1979) noted, “The eye can handle about 5 million bits per second, but the resolving power of the brain is approximately 500 bits per second” (p. 57); therefore, selective attention and selection are necessary actions the brain takes to maintain psychological and mental balance.

The more complex the environment, the number of involved factors increases and the communication process becomes more challenging, especially in an organization undergoing major change (Kotter, 1996). When leaders fail to communicate effectively, a vision about the future can be lost easily in the clutter of daily life (Kotter, 1996). This maxim becomes more evident in non-for-profit or community efforts where work depends on volunteers who share their time and energy of their own volition without material compensation.

Although Kotter (1996) described problems with organizational change processes, the following example deserves consideration, especially in voluntary organizations. Imagine being an employee in a typical organization with a hierarchical structure. Within a three-month period, you could expect to receive communications totaling approximately 2.3 million words or numbers (Kotter, 1996). Unfortunately, communications about an organization’s change vision within the same period typically cover only about 13,400 words or numbers, which is roughly equivalent to one 30-minute speech, one hour-long presentation, one 600-word article in an organizational newsletter or paper, and one 2,000-word memo. Altogether, these elements would comprise only .58% (.0058) of the total communication you would have received within this period.

Now consider you are a resident of your community, bombarded through the mail, television, and the Internet with innumerable messages on a daily basis. Deciphering the critical messages becomes more difficult because of distractions created by the clutter of unimportant chatter. Creating clear communications and messaging must be a top priority within voluntary teams because of the competition for limited time recipients have to deal with the messages

they receive daily. Given this competition for readers' time, communication must be repetitive to penetrate the human mind.

Communication can be problematic from another sense. When one communicates a message to another person, at least one of the two parties may have to let go of a past assumption or belief based upon new knowledge received through interactions with others. This release of "the status quo" may cause internal tension. This tension can interfere with knowledge management endeavors where team members seek, share, and apply new knowledge or with knowledge creation, where team members create something new altogether.

Knowledge sharing is difficult for some because of fears associated with a lack of trust or cultural beliefs (Becerra-Fernandez, Gonzalez, & Sabherwal, 2004). However, consistent application of team norms that emphasize respect for others, active listening, commitment to excellence, and valuing others' contributions can help relieve these tensions and build relationships within the team. Furthermore, team communications that relieve internal tensions can aid organizational performance, especially when communications reinforce positive behaviors and attitudes and support the organizational culture.

Communication competence stems from one's ability to adapt to varying situations, i.e., the situation contributes to one's interpretation of the communication (Roy, 2001). Various intelligences exist at different degrees and levels throughout society; intelligences, such as emotional, cultural and intellectual, convey different competences within different situations (Gardner, 1993). Like every other competence, communication competence does not merely happen but requires conscious development and attention. One cannot assume that a message or communication designed for one audience will strike the mark with a different audience, even if that audience is a single person. To be effective, teams must customize and communicate multiple messages to different targets to ensure information is clearly understood.

### **Using the Spiral of Knowledge to Create Cohesion, Enhance Communication and Coordination, and Improve Performance**

As noted earlier, human capital within each team is the critical element in team success. Human capital includes the knowledge each person brings to the team. Knowledge exists tacitly, within each person's brain and memory, as well as explicitly in the ways others make their knowledge visible to others.

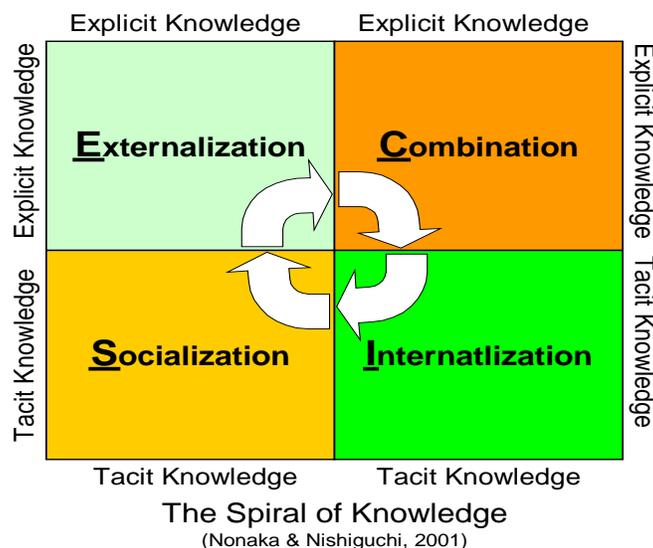
According to Nonaka and Nishiguchi (2001), explicit and tacit knowledge are complimentary and "crucial to knowledge creation" (p. 14). Knowledge must be transformed from a tacit state - within the person or organization - into an explicit state - where it can be shared among many people or organizations for it be useful. This transformation occurs through the four processes known as the SECI (Socialization, Externalization, Combination and Internalization) model.

*Socialization* is a joint activity where tacit knowledge is shared with others, such as in meetings, eating together, living in the same environment, or simply spending time together; *socialization* captures knowledge through physical proximity. Tacit knowledge gained through socialization is articulated into explicit knowledge through *externalization*, where knowledge is "crystallized" and shared, serving as the "basis for new knowledge" (Nonaka & Nishiguchi, 2001, p. 15). Dialogue is a primary method for *externalization*.

Through dialogue, existing knowledge is reconfigured in various ways, such as sorting, adding, or categorizing, resulting in new knowledge through *combination*. This new knowledge may require an examination of old concepts such that new concepts are created; in the organizational context, this action would mostly likely require and result in development of new plans, products, or services. During the *combination* process, several sub-processes occur through which explicit knowledge is made more usable.

*Internalization* results when new explicit knowledge is embodied into tacit knowledge in order to “broaden, extend, and reframe organizational member’s tacit knowledge” (Nonaka and Nishiguchi, p. 17). Although the SECI transformation process has been simplified here, this concept is exceptionally powerful in understanding the continuous process of knowledge creation as well as in pointing toward the purpose of knowledge, particularly in the realm of business innovation and effective execution.

Figure 1 represents the SECI model but also introduces the Spiral of Knowledge that results from the continuous application of SECI. Adult learning reflects the SECI model in action since continuous improvement results from the iterative application of new ideas created through the externalization of individual knowledge, combination with ideas of others, and internalization of a new creation that results from “idea” teamwork.



### The Power of Team Communication in the Age of the Internet

The Internet has enhanced the quality of communication while simultaneously creating more problems that require resolution. According to Becerra-Fernandez, Gonzalez, and Sabherwal (2004), “The Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have revolutionized the concept of communications” (p. 204). This revolution has occurred over the span of approximately 15 years during which time we have seen massive changes in the tools, techniques, processes, systems, applications, and media through which people communicate information, data and knowledge. The growth of social networking has simply compounded the challenges leaders face in communicating effectively with others.

When one considers the Internet as a platform for communication, one should not forget the Internet represents a wide array of telecommunications (telecom) components including satellites, fiber-optic and wireless networks, broadband connections, routers and servers, and

the many companies that manufacture and service these components. According to Zandi (as cited in Ante, 2007), a world-class, spanking new communications network that grew out of the tech crisis of 2000 has been the “key to outsized productivity gains” (p. 51). These productivity gains stem from a hyperactive business environment where demands for asynchronous communication have risen dramatically in proportion to perceived and real gains.

These gains were impossible without the digital computer and the transmission of digitized electronic data across physical space, a feat previously considered a barrier (Becerra-Fernandez et al., 2004). The Internet has facilitated the near-instantaneous electronic transmission of vast amounts of nonhuman information, e.g., documents, photos, drawings, films, published articles, etc. that heretofore required physical transfer by a ground delivery service. Yet, the growth and expansion of companies such as FedEx and UPS as well as the US Postal Service ran parallel to the expansion of the Internet since each of these enterprises uses the web as an instrument for selling services and products as well as shipping and tracking packages.

The Internet serves as the backbone for improving various forms of communication within companies. The synchronous communication of past company success, such as phone calls and face-to-face meetings, has been eclipsed by the explosive growth of various forms of asynchronous communication, such as email and voicemail, collaborative tools such as Blackboard, and social networking tools such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Nonetheless, the Internet’s ability to accelerate the interchange of knowledge has created problems for some organizations, particularly in terms of decision-making. Despite the availability of information and knowledge, leaders in many organizations do not know how to capitalize upon this treasure chest because of outmoded organizational structures (Neilson, Pasternack, & Mendes, 2004).

Teams are an effective cellular organization type for dealing with the challenges of rapid, Internet-based communication (Miles, Snow, Mathews, Miles, and Coleman, 1997). The accumulation and application of knowledge and “know-how” to opportunities and demands of the day are the keys to these “lighter, more adaptive organizational forms” (Miles et al., 2004). Drucker’s (1999) prognostication that the 21<sup>st</sup> century institution must rely upon knowledge workers and their productivity requires major changes in organizational structure that will generate and enhance innovation. The Internet has been both a blessing and curse in this regard; some leaders have responded well while others are still trying to figure what has happened and what needs to be done. In short, the Internet has caused the acceleration of teams that must be light, fast, and mobile in order to respond to external events.

### Summary

Leaders at all levels should gain from knowledge about the communication process within teams and organizations. Using the Spiral of Knowledge as a mental model and internal practice for collaborating and creating new knowledge should be a major lesson learned from these pages. Communication within teams will progressively improve the more team members practice the SECI approach to knowledge creation. Finally, technology can aid team performance but should not dominate team interactions. Relationships built on trust are still the foundation to effective team performance, and this trust can only be built and maintained through regular communication and interaction.

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