

Expedited Communications for Dispersed Project Teams
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Introduction

Why are communications important?

This paper will address the most critical project success factor — communications. Without exception, every project completion report or lessons learned session we have facilitated or read about has contained the recommendation "Improve Communications." Unfortunately, the recommendation has seldom specified what the communication problem was and what improvements could be implemented.

Since new project teams are often comprised of diverse strangers, getting effective communications in place expeditiously has always been a priority. The trend toward geographically dispersed teams has intensified this requirement and added cultural differences as another factor. A recent survey of our clients confirmed that their team members are now more dispersed and communications, which have always been difficult, are now critical.

We can expedite effective communications by a better understanding of how humans communicate. Not only can we consciously avoid building barriers but we can also develop processes that facilitate communications for our unique group of dispersed people.

We can expedite effective communications by a better understanding of how this process works and how we cannot only consciously avoid building barriers but also develop processes that facilitate communications for our unique group of people and circumstances.

Degrees of dispersion

Project teams experience varying degrees of dispersion or scattering. Some international teams never meet, while others meet rarely or even frequently. National teams are often dispersed across the country, with face-to-face meetings occurring less frequently than teleconference meetings. Teams can be dispersed throughout the state or province or city, and physically meet frequently, and if they are in the same building but on different floors, the degree of dispersion they are experiencing is small. However, unless the team is co-located, all the needs for expedited communications are still more compelling than if the team works together in the same area of the same floor of the same building.

Communication Theory

Overview

We have determined that few practitioners understand the fundamentals of human-to-human communications despite the amount of time they spend in this crucial activity. During the development of this paper, we came to understand why one guru wrote that when all the complexities of communication became known to him, he marveled that humans were able to communicate at all.

One of the reasons that communications are difficult is that the human brain consists of not one brain but three. First there's the oldest, most primitive of our brains, called the "reptilian brain" because we share it in common with reptiles. The reptile brain has a singular focus: survival. It reacts to hunger and fear and is responsible for fight-or-flight. It's also non-verbal – it operates purely at the level of stimulus-response. Our second brain is one we share with other mammals. This mammalian brain, sometimes referred to as the Limbic Brain, handles emotions like love, indignation, compassion, envy, and hope. Our third brain - the neocortex ("new" cortex) - is something we share with the higher apes, although ours is a bit more sophisticated. Resting over the limbic brain (which is, in turn, atop

the reptilian brain), our neocortex is where we process abstract thought, words and symbols, logic and time. (See Exhibit 1 – A Simplistic View of the Human Brain below.)

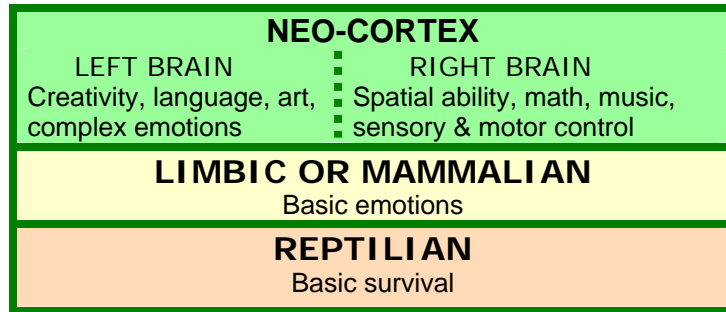


Exhibit 1 – The Human Brain

As if having 3 brains stacked one on the other wasn't complicated enough, the neo-cortex has 2 sides – the left side for creativity, language, art, and emotions, and the right side for spatial ability, math, music, and motor control. All the parts of the brain are “wired” together, but they don't necessarily process the information in the same way. All the brains use some of the channels of human communication: text, voice, and body language, as illustrated in Exhibit 2 – Channels of Communication below and sometimes pick up conflicting messages. As an example, when the tone indicates an emotion to the limbic brain that does not match the language component of the communication as interpreted by the left side of the neo-cortex, the brain will block one part in order to process the message. It may not have made the right choice.

Channels of Communication

There are three main channels of communication by which a sender sends the message and the receiver receives and decodes the message. Each channel is cumulative: the narrowest band is text/words only. This expands considerably when the voice is added: intonations, speed, and accent give a clearer picture to the message. Communication reaches its full potential only when text and voice are combined with face-to-face where body language including facial gestures completes the information package for both the sender and the receiver.

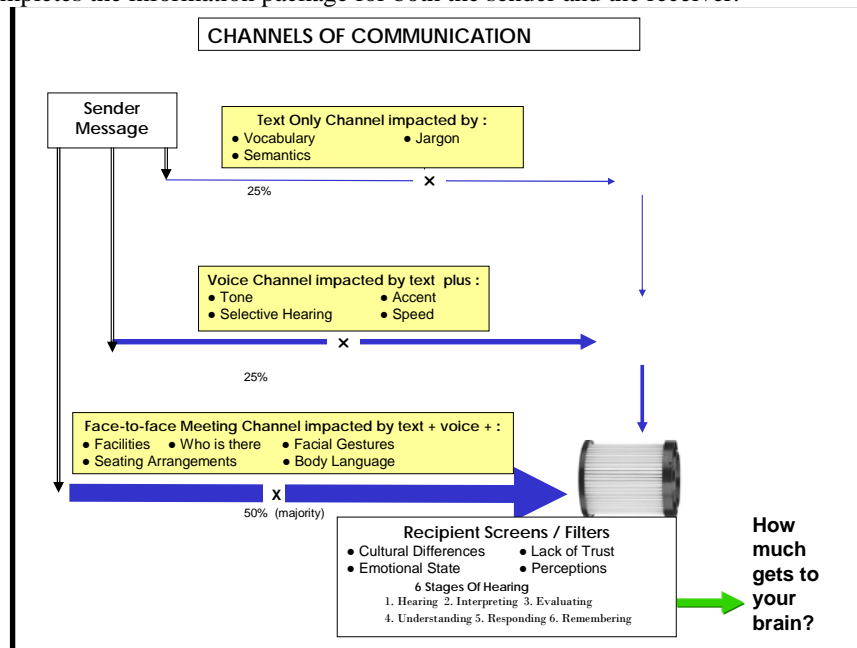


Exhibit 2 – Channels of Communication

The complexity of transmission grows rapidly with the addition of communication channels, and to make matters more difficult, we don't know how accurately the recipient receives the intended communication. Some of the more important filters used by the recipient are trust, gender, age, and cultural differences between the communicators, and the emotional state of the receiver. With the increased complexity of signals comes an increased efficiency of communication time – far more information can be transferred face to face than can be transferred by text only, in the same amount of communication time.

This model works best for people with similar culture and language skills regardless of physical separation.

It is helpful to understand the listening process. According to Bjorseth (2005) hearing is only the first in a six-step hierarchical listening process – the five steps that follow are interpreting, evaluating, understanding, responding, and finally, remembering. To enhance the listening process, we should create an encouraging environment whereby we genuinely listen and focus on mutual interests rather than differing positions.

To further improve listening, we should use such effective tools as repeating and summarizing, while avoiding such 'idea killer' phrases such as "that will never work" or "your idea sounds great, but . . ."

It is very important to have the tone of voice match the meaning of the message. If the tone and the content are mixed in terms of message whereby one is negative and the other is positive, the message is potentially misinterpreted. The boss who smiles while firing someone is clearly delivering a mixed message. In project work, particularly when not co-located, it is crucial that the intended message is the received message. When verbal and non-verbal messages match, they augment the message. How many people know themselves well enough to know whether their brains select the verbal portion of a mixed message thus ignoring the conflict, or reject the entire message? How much less likely that we know how anybody else reacts to mixed messages?

When considering how much communication between dispersed team members occurs via telephone, it becomes apparent just how important that there be congruence between the words spoken and the tone used in order to achieve effective and accurate communications.

Cultural Differences and Dispersed Teams

As project teams become more and further dispersed, nationally and internationally, it becomes more of a challenge to be aware of and counter any built-in biases and stereotypes we may be carrying. Almost all of us maintain inaccurate stereotypes and we must be aware of these blinders because we are less likely to notice, encode deeply, and remember any information that violates our stereotypes. It is one of our screens or filters. For the most part, when we encounter people who contradict our stereotype, we don't appear to change our deep-seated bias but rather see them as unique individuals instead of than representatives of their national or cultural group. (Hamilton and Sherman, 1996)

Dispersed teams that leverage the power of differences can outperform teams that have members who are more similar in background and culture. The key is to recognize this leverage and use it to the team's advantage by considering what components of the different cultures can be adopted into the team's culture to make it a more effective team. (Aranda and Aranda, 1998)

Understanding the dimensions of culture (Hofstede, 2006, Duarte & Snyder, 2001) and how different societies embrace these dimensions is a first step in understanding the cultural differences between different groups. The five commonly discussed dimensions are:

1. **Power Distance** which focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in a society.
2. **Individualism** which focuses on the degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships.
3. **Uncertainty Avoidance** which focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society - i.e. unstructured situations.
4. **Masculinity** which focuses on the degree the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power.
5. **Long-Term Orientation** which focuses on the degree the society embraces, or does not embrace long-term devotion to traditional, forward thinking values.

According to Duarte & Snyder (2001), the first three have the greatest potential to influence team dynamics; understanding and working with these differences can expedite successful communications in dispersed teams.

Text-only electronic communication

We have to amend some of our communication protocols when we deal with cultural or language differences. Text-only electronic communication can reduce cultural differences in two major areas. Firstly, technology can increase the focus on ideas while decreasing the focus on titles and personalities. (Duarte & Snyder, 2001). This is particularly useful when the team contains members of a culture who are very conscious of the power distance (#1 above). And secondly, the written medium eliminates visual and sound clues; people are judged by the value of their ideas and not by their gender, age, color, clothing, gestures, and verbal capability. (Jarvenpaa & Leider, 1998). Writing provides time to respond which makes it easier to make fewer language errors for those whose first language is not the one used by the team. However, with language barriers, face-to-face meetings provide much more information than the mere written word, something to consider when deciding to have a live, non-electronic meeting of the dispersed team.

Collaboration software

Collaboration software can promote the reduction of cultural differences and encourage team spirit at the same time. According to Riis and Suhr-Jessen (2004), one should build the 'war room' online as a project website so that the dispersed team feels that everything is in one place; this is as effective as team building, as in a co-located physical war room. The dispersed project room system should have 3 components:

1. Communications systems
2. Social Systems
3. Technical Systems to support the actual work project

The social system is often neglected in favour of the other systems, but social aspects are crucial for the co-operation within the project team and hence for project success. The project room should be fun and inspiring – otherwise the participants will choose to spend their time elsewhere and the possibilities of the room are not utilized. All three systems must be represented in the project room to achieve effective co-operation and project work.

Body Language and Dispersed Teams

When you look at another person, and specifically when you look at a person's face, an MRI scanning shows massive sections of brain waking up to process the information and it's all devoted to absorbing and interpreting every nuance of facial expression. Facial gestures can be blends of various emotions expressing conflict, or rapid changes from one expression to another and back again which can occur faster than 1/5 of a second and which may only be observed by the limbic brain. However, when such interactions are filmed and replayed at slow speeds these transitions are quite evident and usually represent either internal conflict or an attempt to conceal. The limbic brain picks up another person's facial gestures, even if the neo-cortex does not. This limbic comprehension of the sent message explains the importance of consistent messages.

Since dispersed teams see each other less frequently than co-located ones, the face-to-face meetings can take on a greater significance. Understanding the effect that a team member's negative body language can have on other members can significantly contribute to positive communications; some of the more obvious positions to avoid are: arms crossed, hands grasped behind the body when standing (arrogance?), and standing when the other team member is sitting (dominance?). The limbic brain is always seeking information not contained in the language, and incongruence between a negative limbic response and a positive neo-cortical response can often lead to the unintended result of a negative message received. Since dispersed teams see each other less frequently, there are fewer opportunities to correct misunderstood messages.

Trust

Trust is a critical element in expedited communications. As we hope we have shown, the physical part of communications is difficult enough for a sender genuinely trying to send a clear, accurate message to the attentive

receiver. What happens if the motivation or behavior of one of the parties is to be vague or deceitful or even untruthful?

Without the confidence to rely on and believe in the truth, worth, reliability of distant team members, the dispersed team will founder and probably fail. It is very difficult to correct erroneous first impressions; this is particularly true in dispersed teams. Jarvenpaa and Leider (1998) found when studying 29 teams that only four teams shifted from an initial low trust condition to a high trust condition by the end of the study. They discovered that unless trust developed quickly, it often did not develop within the team at all. Expedited communications, with an emphasis on building trust, take on an even more important role in dispersed teams.

As a trust-building exercise during the kickoff meeting, consider brainstorming with the team to capture ideas for developing trusting behaviors. Trusting behaviors could include the topics of openness, community and empowerment. A similar session to capture trustworthy behaviors could include such topics as respect, cooperation, and dependability.

Tools or Protocols for Dispersed Teams

The communication process for dispersed teams can be assisted by developing some standard team practices. These practices fall into 4 main protocols: general communication, teleconference meetings, e-mails, and a formalized method of evaluating the team itself with a team code of conduct.

General Communication Protocols

The first step in general communications is to select the appropriate channel of communication. Developing a team communication commitment with all team members signing it will go a long way to encourage good team communication and is especially useful in dispersed teams. Periodic surveys of the team regarding their communication commitments and how well they are working are advantageous, particularly in group meetings where the comments can be discussed, and team communication can be improved. One small but easy method of improving communication is by requesting that the team complete a Communication Preferences sheet like Exhibit 3 - Communication Preferences below, with particular emphasis on the preferred method each team member has for communicating.

| Name | Organization | Courier Address | Office Tel | Mobile Tel | Email | Communication Mode in Preference Order |
|------|--------------|-----------------|------------|------------|-------|--|
| | | | | | | 1. Office phone 2. Cell phone 3. Only check email at night |

Exhibit 3 – Communication Preferences

When planning for expedited and effective communications for dispersed teams, more thought given at the front end will result in more efficient teams. Various protocols can contribute to clarity of communication by setting out expectations for who will attend different types of meetings and receive different levels of status reports.

A team Communications Commitment can be developed at the kickoff meeting to ensure that all team members are initially in agreement about their communications. A suggested list of points to incorporate follows:

- Use the agreed approach to problem solving and decision making.
- Ensure the interests and goals of the team are well-known and kept in the forefront
- Make it easy for others to disclose information & ideas – don't shoot the messenger
- If you need advice, call the expert team member.
- Be thoughtful in team personal interaction; examine different perspectives.
- Keep confidential documents within the core team.
- Review the team's progress via audio conference every week.
- No long document details during group audio conferences – take these "off line".
- Use 'by whens' to expedite document movement through the system.

- Unless otherwise stated, only the team leader has the authority to communicate outside the team.
- E-mail messages are to be used for updating and exchanging information only. Interpersonal issues are not to be addressed using e-mail: use the telephone or a face-to-face meeting.
- Check voice mail and email as per your Project Team Communication Preference (Exhibit 3) sheet. Say what you will do and do it.
- If you are going to be out of the office, advise the team.

A final suggestion for a communication protocol is to have all team members take part in a preference inventory where the team members learn their own and other members' work styles and preferences. The better the team understands themselves and others, the more productive it can be.

Teleconference Meeting Protocols

Since meetings must be scheduled far more in advance for dispersed teams than co-located ones, it is very important that their value is maximized for the team. The team must make a commitment to a meeting protocol which they are prepared to support. Some suggested components follow:

- Attend all mandatory meetings, and all meetings that you agreed to attend.
- Find the best time zone or zones for the team for conference calls
- Link times and dates to a selected time zone for conference calls.
- If there is background noise, keep the mute button on unless speaking.
- Do not interrupt.
- Respect the chair and the agenda. Only the chair adds items to the agenda.
- An agenda and minutes are sent out 3 days prior to and 3 days after each meeting.
- Appoint who takes minutes to keep track of details and follow up on action items and tasks.
- Provide "think breaks" after discussions and before significant decisions. Take breaks every 60 to 90 minutes.
- At the end of each meeting, evaluate that meeting.

E-Mail Protocols

When Saphiere studied 56 people on 12 global business teams (1996), she discovered that the key indicator of project team success was the number of initiated work-related emails. The number of responses was not nearly as important as the number of initiations. The high-performing teams did not get bogged down in evaluating and responding to every initiation. Many times, one response (to some number of similar initiations) was all that was needed to move them forward. In other cases, initiations spawned more initiations as team members "seconded" the original initiation, aligning themselves to the underlying idea of the initiation rather than responding to it. At the mid-point of the project, the high-performing teams accelerated and initiated more action requests while the low-performing teams decelerated, making fewer initiations as the project came to conclusion. E-mails can be substitutions for the "water cooler" conversations that generally occur in an office and make the team members feel connected to each other.

Developing an e-Mail protocol at the start of the project will go a long way toward effective communications between team members. If all team members agree to such topics as frequency of email checking, response time, what to do if there is no response, how to handle situations inappropriate for email, who gets copied, and greetings and farewells, then communications between dispersed project teams can be greatly expedited.

Team Code of Conduct

Once the 3 protocols have been developed, it is advantageous to put them all together into a team code of conduct and then periodically survey the team to ensure that what was agreed to is occurring. To reinforce the agreed behaviors and protocols, it is essential to keep the code of conduct in front of the team members, especially when it is not the way they are used to doing business. Some suggestions regarding the code of conduct review follow:

- Use the components of the protocols for a "How Are We Doing" periodic survey review checklist
- With the review employ a range of responses from '1-rarely to 5-always'.

- When the survey results reach 3/5 or 4/5 monthly, reduce the survey frequency to quarterly.
- If the results begin to drop, the frequency of surveys will increase, and the team leader can discuss issues privately.
- Pre-determine how non-performance will be handled – at what point the task will be reassigned.

Conclusions

1. It is a marvel that humans can communicate at all.
2. We must understand our own communication style. We must be careful not to transfer strong negative feelings about one person onto an innocent third party, and not attribute to others a feeling or a belief that we actually hold ourselves.
3. The first step in better communications is to consciously select the appropriate channel of communication for each topic.
4. Developing a team communication commitment will encourage good team communication.
5. Periodic team surveys regarding how well they are communicating are advantageous.
6. We can expedite effective communications by a better understanding of how humans communicate. Not only can we consciously avoid building barriers but we can also develop processes that facilitate communications for our unique group of dispersed people.

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