

Article Category: COMMUNICATION

Seven Causes of Communication Breakdown – Part II

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Poor communication is far and away the most cited reason by project teams for their failures, so by understanding the origins of communication problems you can vastly improve your chances for success.

After asking these questions of 134 project teams, and then working with each team to improve their results, I began to realize that often what the team believes to be a communication issue is actually a symptom of the real problem — or root cause. When a team identifies their problem as one of poor communication, and then works to try and resolve the “poor communication” issue, I found that significant improvement could not be made. Only by understanding the root cause can you effectively work to solve the underlying issue.

Gleaned from 134 project teams, here are seven causes of communication breakdown and how to prevent or overcome them. Details of the causes appeared in Part 1 of this article appearing in the October e-News

1. Fear

To overcome fear you must work to develop trust among the team members. Trust develops when you do what you say you are going to do — and by doing your part to help the team succeed. Teams are interdependent. No one succeeds unless everyone pulls together. Trust erodes when someone feels that they are being treated unfairly. So always talk about what is fair, put fairness on the table whenever you see fear erupting on your project. Then, work to find a way to resolve issues that is fair to everyone involved.

2. Misaligned Expectations

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then why not draw a picture of how your team is organized. Who is doing what, how do people fit into the process? What is their role? Who has the authority to make which decisions? What is the decision making process? By drawing a picture and allowing team members to ask questions, you will begin to align expectations by agreeing on how things are supposed to (or need to) work. Doing this exercise should make it very clear where you have misaligned expectations, or misunderstanding, on roles, responsibilities and authority. Then, you can work to come to agreement.

3. Confusion

For a team to succeed, someone must be the leader. I see many teams without a clear leader and the teams seem to lack direction and clarity. People vie for power and position, and that never leads to success. Instead work to become a trusted leader. A leader by definition is someone who has followers. And following is voluntary. A trusted leader is someone who people follow because they trust them to lead the team to success. When people trust the leader then they feel they have a choice to be a part of the team. And the leader can offer clear direction, problem solving and decision making when needed.

4. Loss of Momentum

Teams start out and gain momentum over time. When problems and issues arise it causes a loss of momentum. However, if the problem or issue is resolved quickly the momentum is only slightly diminished and the team continues to move forward and grow. It is therefore imperative that you have a clear process for resolving issues quickly. This process needs to be known by all and used. One such process is to agree to disagree on an issue and then empower a new set of people to look at the issue so they can offer their ideas for resolution. Give these new people the power to decide. Then move on. Indecision is your enemy.

5. Dissatisfaction

Teams that have fun perform better. And you can build in the fun. It is important to take time to laugh and enjoy each other. I have seen teams that play golf, have barbecues, share a joke at the start of each meeting, and learn to fish together. These were top performing teams. So monitor the level of fun on your team and work to ensure that your team is having fun together.

6. Lack of Commitment

Some people are just along for the ride and are not really committed to the success of your project. This causes enormous stress on the other team members. Sometimes you can't do much to get rid of the lack of commitment, but you can monitor and manage the level of stress that the team encounters. Teams come together to accomplish something. So there needs to be celebrations along the way (perhaps at each milestone) of accomplishment.

7. Unconscious Incompetence

Both the experienced and inexperienced team members must be open to the possibility of sharing knowledge. Having a mentor can shorten the learning curve for new hires by decades. Too often new people are sent to do the grunt work or sent into the project like lambs to the slaughter. These are not very effective ways to deal with people who need to learn. For those of you who are new, you must accept that others who have been around for some time have seen a few more things than you have. You don't need to know every thing. Your job is to learn.

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