Strategic Team-Based Communication

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COM/520

November 25, 2013

April Adams
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Successful teams are teams that have developed effective communication strategies. This paper highlights the importance of effective team communication by exploring an example of poor team communication. Addressed are the criteria of effective communication, solutions that make communication more successful, and various approaches to improved team-based communication. The premise supported herein is that effective team communication must be a two way street. Communication must flow in both directions to ensure that projects, such as the one described below, have the best chance for success. Suggestions for accomplishing this bidirectional flow of communication, illuminates the advantages of early and improved team-based communication.

Poor Team Communication Example

San Joaquin Valley College is a private career college with 13 campuses located throughout California. The Career Service department consists of the director of graduate services, a career service specialist; career service managers on each campus and career service advisors on each campus.

Career service advisors facilitate an online class called CSS100. Recently it was determined that the class needed to be restructured. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) were not consistently realized. The career service management team assembled a project team consisting of the director of graduate services, the career service specialist, one career service manager and two career service advisors. For the purposes of this paper the project team will be referred to as the core team. The larger virtual team will be referred to as the broader team. During the process of restructuring the course there are several examples of communication errors that indicates there was not an effective communication strategy employed by the core team.
The major errors in this example are the lack of audience focus, and the presentation of the communication occurred at the wrong time and presented in the wrong way. Taking the needs of the audience into consideration, the communication regarding restructuring the class would have occurred much sooner. Career service advisors were not informed of the class restructure project until after the work was completed. The broader team first learned about the restructure during a regional training where the new course was presented.

Communication Criteria

Thill and Bovée (2013) describe a successful team as a group of people who can increase information and knowledge, increase diversity of views, increase acceptance of solutions, and “unleash new levels of creativity and energy” (Thill & Bovée, 2013, p. 35).

There are five communication criteria that if followed, lead to effective team communication, (1) having a clear objective and a shared sense of purpose, (2) communicating openly and honestly, (3) reaching decisions by consensus, (4) thinking creatively, and (5) knowing how to resolve conflict (Thill & Bovée, 2013, p. 36).

The core team had a shared sense of purpose and a clear objective but failure to include the broader team in the vision resulted in resistance to the final outcome. The core team, by creating an open and honest channel of communication with the broader team would have benefited from the creativity of the entire team. Using the criteria of a shared vision and an open and honest communication channel can improve communication and facilitate audience receptivity. In “The Root Causes of Poor Communication” Dyer points out, “When team members each have a different expectation of how things are supposed to work you have misaligned expectations (Dyer, 2006, 1). She goes on to suggest that this can be avoided by drawing a picture the team structure. “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 work (Dyer, 2006, p. 2).

Communication Channels and Solutions

The communication channel selected by the core team was to communicate the changes made to the CSS100 class during training. This provided no opportunity for audience feedback. During the process of restructuring the class there was no channel of communication between the core team and the broader team tasked with facilitating the class. This lack of clear and early communication channels resulted in resistance to change, and missed opportunities. The goal of this project was to increase the quality of the information provided in the CSS100 class and facilitate better achievement of the SLOs. This common vision was shared by all career service advisors yet the way to achieve this was not articulated to the full team. This is when the communication broke down. According to Sandelands (1994) in his article “Channels of Communication” for communication in the workplace to be effective there must be an approach that is disciplined at the top yet keeps the grassroots in touch. He offers various channels or methods of accomplishing this. One such channel that would have improved communication in this scenario is team briefings. “Team briefing is a strategic tool for getting all levels of the company to communicate with each other” (Sandelands, 1994, p. 1). The team briefing strategy would have allowed for communication to flow to the broader team early in the process. All campuses are equipped with Telepresence a videoconferencing system. This technology makes facilitating team briefings easy and cost effective.

In this scenario the career service advisors felt left out of the process and that there was no avenue for valuable input to be communicated to the core team. “As a method of promoting employee involvement and upward communication, employee suggestion schemes are very
Communication is vital to the healthy functioning of any team. As the above scenario illustrates the timing of communication is just as important as the message that is being transmitted. By adhering to the five criteria for effective communication, (1) having a clear objective and a shared sense of purpose, (2) communicating openly and honestly, (3) reaching decisions by consensus, (4) thinking creatively, and (5) knowing how to resolve conflict (Thill & Bovée, 2013, p. 36), teams can be productive, successful, and achieve goals.

In this example of team communication the channels of communication were limited offering no opportunity for receiver feedback. There was no clear vision shared by the complete career service team. The core team failed to consider the audience or the needs of the broader team. The result of this was poor receptivity and resistance to the message on the part of the receiver. In situations such as described in the example above team member want to feel included not dictated to. This example of poor communication can be avoided by opening bidirectional channels of communication early in the process. Using technology such as Telepresence video conferencing offer a cost effective way to hold team briefings and allows for conversation and communication to flow in both directions. Employing avenues of communication such as suggestion schemas allow team members to feel that his or her voice has been heard. Utilizing such technology as Internet-based shared workspace is a great way to
facilitate this type of interaction. Opening the lines of communication early provide the opportunity for multiple levels of creativity to surface and flourish adding value not only to the productivity of the team but also to the process. There is no substitute for effective communication.
References


