

How to Improve Team Productivity

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Leadership
Alignment
Vision
Communication
Building Trust
Conflict Management
Strategies

Effective teams require a combination of factors to be in place. They require effective leadership. They need to be aligned in many different directions. They need a shared vision. Conflict within the team needs to be managed in a proactive and constructive manner. Most critically they need high levels of effective, interpersonal communication. With these factors in place a team will succeed in achieving high levels of productivity.

Effective teams require effective leadership! This statement may appear self explanatory. If that is the case then why is it that so often a department or team appears ineffective, even in some cases, dysfunctional? The answer is that while we know and understand the need for effective leadership; in many cases we do not practice effective leadership. This is particularly true in circumstances where a team is failing to achieve its desired outcomes.

Leadership is not a magic potion. I can almost hear it now. Find us a leader and we will go places. Not always so. Leadership is a combination of science and art. Science because many of the competencies of effective leadership have been hypothesized, tested and theorized by researchers worldwide. Art because leaders deal with people and people are notorious for not always doing what the research states they will do. Leadership is the ability to communicate in a manner that creates momentum, and a desire amongst team members to work together.

Effective teams are aligned. The team vision is aligned with the organisational vision or goals. The team leader is aligned with the team members. The team members have aligned their vision with that of the team and of the organisation and with each other. The team working process is aligned with the working processes within the remainder of the organisation. Misalignment creates confusion and conflict and reduces productivity. Alignment is more than simply ensuring visions, objectives and process are matching, it is also about communication. More importantly it is about dialogue. It is about team members communicating with each other and sharing information. Misalignment occurs because team members don't have sufficient understanding of each other and the gaps in their knowledge cause them to make assumptions.

A vision provides the guiding light for team members. A clear, well understood and appealing vision attracts excellent people to teams. A compelling vision for your team provides the team members with a challenge – to achieve the vision – by using effective goal setting and actions. A vision is the starting point, it is the light at the end of the tunnel and it provides clarity of purpose. More importantly than having a vision is having the ability to communicate that vision in a manner that makes it understood and appealing. Being able to communicate that vision – communication by the team leader to the team members and also between the team members themselves is critical to the productivity and success of a team.

It will not have taken long for you, the reader, to have identified a common trait amongst all the above attributes of an effective team. That trait is the ability to communicate. Communication is a core leadership competency. It is also a core competency amongst team members. Without effective communication a team will fail to achieve its objectives. Effective communication is not

only a result of applying fundamental competencies it is also a result of individuals taking personal responsibility for their own behavior. These two factors are inextricably linked. Effective communicators are observers firstly of their own behavior and secondly of the behavior of others. Effective communicators know and understand the reason why they need to communicate. They take responsibility for the effectiveness of their communication. These are not only competencies of great team leaders they are also the competencies needed by each and every member of the team.

Conflict is a two-headed beast within teams. On one hand conflict can be destructive and on the other hand it can contribute to urgency and creativity. The key here is to understand that conflict is a natural part of individuals working together. Conflict cannot be eliminated. At the worst it can be reduced. At the best it can be managed so as to enhance the creativity and minimize the disruption. The natural tendency of many people is to avoid dealing with conflict. Those that choose to deal with conflict often do so in an aggressive manner. On the surface avoidance may appear logical however avoidance can be just as ineffective as reacting in an aggressive manner. It is the role of team leaders to ensure their team members have an understanding of the frameworks for effective conflict resolution and are trained in the application of these frameworks. At an individual team member level dealing with conflict is about dealing with the truth. Understanding the truth requires well developed communication competencies.

This white paper is headed 'How to improve team productivity'. In effect this paper is about how to use effective communication techniques and strategies to improve team productivity. Our aim being to show that while there are a number of factors involved in creating effective teams, any one of them on their own or all those factors combined will be ineffective without good communication.

Leadership

*"Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real change that reflect their mutual purpose."*¹ Note the words used within this definition – influence, relationship, intend real change and mutual purpose. Leadership is about building relationships to achieve this you need to be able to communicate. Leadership is about influencing, to achieve this you need to be able to communicate. Leadership is about mutual purpose, this is sharing a common vision and that vision needs to be communicated. By now you should be getting the picture. Effective leadership requires effective communication.

In the late 1970's James McGregor Burns introduced the concept of *transactional* and *transformational* leadership. Burns argued that all leaders could be classified as being either one or the other. Burns went onto suggest that transactional leaders based their leadership on an exchange of rewards for compliance; and that transformational leaders based their leadership on upon motivating and empowering individuals.³

Burns's original concept was picked up by Bernard M. Bass who proposed a theory of transformational leadership. Bass suggested transformational leaders motivate others to achieve more than they thought they could ever achieve. Bass proposed that transformational leaders uses strategies and techniques such as creating and communicating a vision, facilitating innovation and creativity, being a role model, coaching and providing individual support.²

The Full Range Model of Leadership

Transformational leadership

- Inspiration motivation (creating vision and objectives and being committed to them)
- Intellectual stimulation (facilitating innovation and creativity)
- Idealised influence (role modeling)
- Individual consideration (coaching, individual support, acceptance of individual difference)

Transactional leadership

- Contingent reward (specifying conditions and rewards)
- Management-by-exception
- Active (monitoring and correcting deviancies from standards)
- Passive (problem-solving correcting errors)

Non-leadership (absence or avoidance of leadership)

The Full Range model of leadership based on (Bass 1994)⁴

Also in the 1970's Robert Greenleaf proposed the concept of servant leadership. The servant leader focuses on serving those they lead rather than on some higher purpose, such as themselves or the organisation. Servant leadership shares many of the traits of transformational leadership – meeting the needs of others, helping employees bring out the best in themselves, coaching people, encouraging self expression, facilitating creativity, listening and helping to build a community.³

Larry C Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center has identified a set of ten characteristics that are critical to servant leadership, these include –

- The ability to listen
- Having empathy and being empathetic
- The ability to heal relationships
- Being aware
- Using persuasion rather than authority
- Being able to conceptualize (to dream big dreams)
- Having foresight
- Stewardship (holding something in trust)
- Commitment to the growth of others
- Ability to build community

Transformational or servant leadership is emerging as the preferred leadership style within the current business environment. In the past, when the business environment was stable and predictable, leaders could be successful through use of command and control management techniques. Current leaders work within a constantly changing environment where the required level of creativity is higher, the product development cycle is shorter, where competition arrives in ways never contemplated in the past and where market analysts influence investors and executives alike. This is an environment that demands a different set of leadership competencies.

Today's employee is emerging from a generation where individual values are at the forefront. These employees have little loyalty to anyone other than themselves – they have grown up

watching long-term loyalty being cast aside in the interests of economic efficiency - they are cynical and self-centered. They are also highly educated and highly skilled. They don't plan their careers instead they take advantage of opportunities as they emerge – often they create their own opportunities. Today's employees demand a new style of leadership; one which caters to their needs, that allows them to maximize their education and training, that involves them in the decision making process and most of all keeps them challenged and motivated. They are demanding leadership that fosters and encourages multi-directional communication.

What follows from this for management is that leaders, in order to do well, will have to learn to pay attention to a different set of variables; the variables that used to be referred to as 'soft', such as intentions, interpretations and identity.⁴

So if these are the emerging traits of effective leaders then what are the competencies leaders require? The so-called 'soft skills' referred to above by Jung & Wendler are in fact emotional competencies originally researched by Mayer, Salovey & Caruso⁵ and made popular by Daniel Goleman, the author of *Working with Emotional Intelligence*.⁶

Following is the emotional competence framework as outlined by Daniel Goleman in his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence*.

Personal Competence

These competencies determine how we manage ourselves

Self-Awareness – *knowing ones internal states, preferences, resources and intuitions*

- **Emotional awareness:** Recognising one's emotions and their effects
- **Accurate self-assessment:** Knowing one's strengths and limits
- **Self-confidence:** A strong sense of one's self worth and capabilities

Self-Regulation – *managing one's internal states, impulses and resources*

- **Self control:** Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check
- **Trustworthiness:** Maintaining standards of honesty and integrity
- **Conscientiousness:** Taking responsibility for personal performance
- **Adaptability:** Flexibility in handling change
- **Innovation:** Being comfortable with novel ideas, approaches and new information

Motivation – *emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals*

- **Achievement drive:** Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence
- **Commitment:** Aligning with the goals of the group or organisation
- **Initiative:** Readiness to act on opportunities
- **Optimism:** Persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks

Social Competencies

These competencies determine how we handle relationships

Empathy – *Awareness of others feelings, needs and concerns*

- **Understanding others:** Sensing others' feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns
- **Developing others:** Sensing others' development needs and bolstering their abilities
- **Service orientation:** Anticipating, recognizing and meeting customers needs
- **Leveraging diversity:** Cultivating opportunities through different kinds of people

- **Political awareness:** Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships

Social Skills – adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others

- **Influence:** Welding effective tactics for persuasion
- **Communication:** Listening openly and sending convincing messages
- **Conflict management:** Negotiating and resolving disagreements
- **Leadership:** Inspiring and guiding individuals and groups
- **Change catalyst:** Initiating or managing change
- **Building bonds:** Nurturing instrumental relationships
- **Collaboration and cooperation:** Working with others toward shared goals
- **Team capabilities:** Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals

Is it sufficient for a leader to focus only on the development and use of 'soft skills', the emotional competencies? No it is not. Leadership is a mixture of soft and hard – leaders need to display a tough edge when the need arises. Effective team leadership requires someone who is competitive and is able to make the hard decisions, to provide guidance where needed and to change the make up of the team when needed, to show courage and to lead by personal example. Not all decisions will be understood or appreciated; nevertheless they have to be made. It is how that decision is transmitted to the team that can mean the difference between acceptance and resistance. This is where the combination of hard-edged management and soft leadership competencies is essential.

What causes leadership to be ineffective, to fail? The *Australian Financial Review*⁷ in July 1997 printed the following line from a report of a survey into corporate leadership within Australia.

*"An overwhelming majority of Australian workers do not trust their leaders because they are uncommunicative, rarely listen to employees and display no confidence in their abilities . . ."*⁸

Another survey of managers within Australia, conducted by Arthur D Little, and reported in *The Australian*⁹ described Australian managers as "limited in their ability to understand and manage key cultural issues"¹⁰. The good news is that in my role as an executive coach I have observed changes in how managers display leadership. Increasingly executives and managers are developing and applying the 'soft skills' the emotional competencies, increasingly they are facilitating and guiding rather than commanding and demanding. The bad news is that insufficient managers are changing fast enough. Until this process of change occurs even more rapidly the dissatisfaction with our current leadership will continue.

The question for you, the reader, to consider is this. Do the descriptions of leadership reported above apply to you? Do you communicate with your team members? Do you listen to your team members? Do you display confidence in the abilities of your team members? Are you able to adapt and be flexible in a culturally diverse team environment? If not, then the answers to your team's ineffectiveness will most certainly rest in the way you manage the team!

George Littlewood¹¹ writing on behalf of the Australian Business Council¹² suggests three trends which threaten effective leadership. These are (1) a decline in trust, (2) sectoral debate [where leadership becomes management] and (3) the need for more effective styles of engagement.

If you are a team leader seeking to maximize productivity then how do you go about increasing your effectiveness as a leader? Bennis and Nanus¹³ suggested four strategies. These are –

- Attention through vision
- Meaning through communication

- Trust through positioning
- The deployment of self through (1) positive self regard, and (2) focusing on trying and learning, not on failing or avoiding failure.

Having discussed vision, communication and trust in some depth earlier in this article let's examine strategies four – the deployment of self - in more detail. There are two aspects to this strategy. The first is *positive self regard*; in short, do you know what you are worth? How well do you understand yourself and your contribution to your team? If you possess a low understanding of your own self worth then you will have trouble displaying leadership. This is not to suggest arrogance; to the contrary, arrogance has a negative impact. It does suggest you should know and understand your own strengths and weaknesses. You need to develop and enhance your strengths and work to them. By understanding your weaknesses you understand your limitations. So often leadership fails and teams fail because the team leaders try to operate beyond their limitations. Bennis and Nanus suggest that if you are able to display positive regard for yourself then you will be able to display positive regard for others.

The second aspect to strategy four is to *focus on trying and learning, not on failing or avoiding failure*. In short, it is better to have tried and failed than to have failed to try. More importantly than clichés is the underlying message. Effective leaders are learning continuously. In their book *Leaders*, Bennis and Nanus stated . . . “When asked . . . our ninety leaders . . . about personal qualities . . . they talked about persistence and self-knowledge; about the willingness to take risks and accept losses; about commitment, consistency and challenge. But above all, they talked about learning” (p187). “Learning is essential fuel for the leader, the source of high-octane energy that keeps up the momentum by continually sparking new understanding, new ideas and new challenges” (p188). Equally as important as continual learning is the ability to ‘*unlearn*’ the old ideas of the past (p201).

As a team leader are you constantly seeking to learn? Are you constantly looking for new ideas and exploring new ways to achieve outcomes? More importantly are you helping and guiding your team members along their own journey of discovery and learning and creativity? There is no ‘I’ in team. On your own you cannot achieve the outcomes for your team. You need to tap into the combine knowledge and experience of all your team members. This is leadership!

James Kouzes and Barry Pozner¹⁴ wrote in *The Leadership Challenge* “The leader’s primary contribution is in the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas, and the willingness to challenge the system in order to get new products, processes, and services adopted. In this sense, it might be more accurate to call them early adopters of innovation. . . Leaders are learners. They learn from their mistakes as well as their successes.”

In researching the material for *The Leadership Challenge* Kouzes & Pozner submitted a survey to 75,000 people over a twenty year period. The survey asked participants to list the characteristics of leadership that they admired and would likely follow. Can you guess which characteristic headed the list? **Honesty!** It’s difficult to ignore the viewpoint of 75,000 people.

Again we turn to Kouzes & Pozner for some ideas on actions to take to create effective team leadership. Kouzas & Pozner identified five key leadership actions, these are –

- Model the way
- Inspire a shared vision
- Challenge the process
- Enable others to act
- Encourage the heart.

Leaders lead from the front. They are visible. They are role models. They behave in the manner they expect their team to behave. Leaders thrive on honesty, they tell the truth and they seek the truth. They are visible and others in their team seeing their leader behaving in this way will follow. Is this how you behave as a team leader? If not, then the problems in your team are due to your leadership! Learn how to change your behavior.

A little bit more on vision. Research has shown that people are not motivated to work for money. Remuneration is never at the top of the list of motivators. People are motivated by ideas though, especially ideas they can share in, ideas that capture their imagination, that spark their interest. Do you have a vision for your team? Do you communicate that vision in a way that makes it exciting and passionate? Do your team members share your vision? If not, then the problems in your team are due to your leadership! Develop a vision and learn how to communicate that vision so that it is something worthwhile for others to believe in.

Nothing remains the same for ever. Effective team leaders are always casting their eyes out over the horizon. They don't need to steer the ship, they can delegate that task to someone else. Leaders need to be constantly looking around, searching, asking questions and challenging the status quo. When was the last time you asked 'why'? Infants drive their parents mad by constantly asking 'why', but it is how they learn. It is also how you learn. It is your role as a leader to challenge the processes in place, to encourage a search for alternatives and to encourage creativity. If you continue to do the same old thing you will always get the same old result. Have you challenged the status quo recently? Have you asked 'why'? If you are accepting the present and not looking to the future then any problems within your team are due to your leadership! Get out there and start asking questions – it is a part of your continual quest for learning.

You can rant and rave as often as you like. You might plaster the wall with motivational messages. On their own they will not be sufficient. The people in your team have to be *able* to do the task asked of them. They need to have the skills and the resources as much as the desire. You as the team leader are the only person with the oversight of team needs. You as their leader have the responsibility for ensuring the right resources are in the right place so that the right outcome is achieved. Do this and your people will believe they have the ability as well as resources to do the job. This combination will achieve outstanding results. When was the last time you undertook an inventory of team skills and abilities? How well do you know and understand your team members? If you have failed to gain this understanding, if you have failed to use your overarching knowledge to benefit all within your team then any problems within your team are due to your leadership! Become knowledgeable and understanding of your people. Learn to leverage their diversity.

Look at yourself in the mirror the next time you go to the bathroom at work. What do you notice? Apart from the day old stubble on your chin (ladies should ignore that comment) what do your eyes tell you? Do you appear happy, contented or even angry? Are your eyes smiling or frowning? You carry your passion for your work in your eyes and in your body language. Your team members watch you and gauge how you feel by your demeanor. To encourage passion and excitement amongst your team members you have to be seen to be displaying passion and excitement. When was the last time you bounced into a room and started asking questions to encourage others to think and be creative? Do you walk around with a permanent frown on your face all day? Do you make curt comments and cut off feedback before it takes up to much of your time? What messages does your behavior send to your team? People like to share stories. Your team members want to hear your stories (so long as they remain relevant) and you need to hear their stories. Story telling invokes passion. Without passion for their task the work quickly becomes a boring chore. If you are not happy in your role, if you are not smiling, if you have no passion, if you don't encourage the storytelling and if you fail to invoke the passion in others then the problems within your team are due to your leadership! It's time to make a change for the better.

Alignment

Alignment is essential so as to ensure the team is moving in the same direction as the remainder of the organisation. Likewise is essential to align the interests and objectives of individual team members with those of the team overall. Misalignment creates wastage. Misalignment results in people moving in different directions, having different goals and seeking different outcomes. Misalignment inevitably results in fragmentation and disappointment as the team objectives are not achieved.

When a group of people work together they form what is known as the organisation. Without people there is no organisation. They form organisational objectives based around the vision they have for the organisation. Within the larger organisational group are smaller groups, or teams. Each of these teams has their vision. Inside these teams are a number of individuals. Each of those individual has their own vision of what they expect to accomplish. As you can see the opportunities for misalignment are endless.

The order of existence is firstly the organisation, secondly the team and finally the individual. How well does your team vision align with that of the organisation? How well do the individuals within your team align their vision with both that of the team and of the organisation?

The key to achieving alignment is once again knowledge. Have you noticed how much of this article is about continuous learning? The knowledge required is an understanding of who is trying to achieve what within your organisation. There is no point in having team objective to introduce a new product when the manufacturing department has an objective to reduce costs. New products inevitably require additional capital expenditure. In this case the two departments would likely be 'competing' against each other – or more likely trying to cut each others throat to eliminate the need to be creative. Either way the result would be the same. It would be highly likely neither department would achieve its objectives.

As you can see from that example, alignment is not only necessary it is essential. Earlier in this article we discussed the need for an effective vision and proposed that in order to create a vision the team firstly has to have an understanding of the current situation within the organisation. This is where you develop an understanding of those potential misalignments. In other words, while your team is learning about the current environment it is also seeking to identify what the vision and objectives are for the organisation overall and for other teams within the organisation. In this way your team is able to identify conflicts of interests and conflicting objectives.

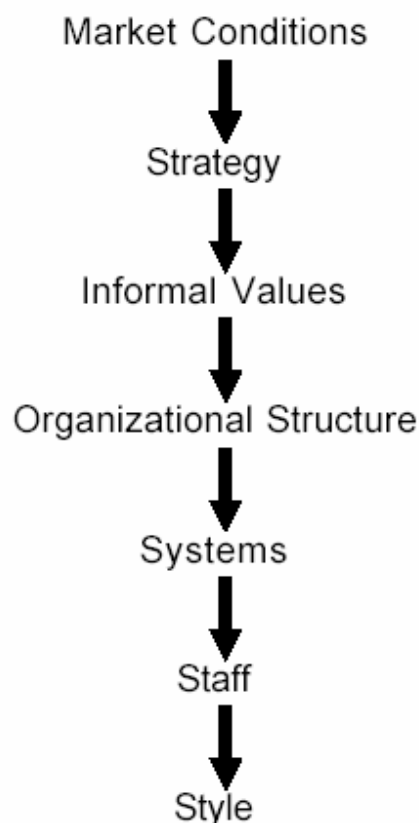
Individual alignment extends beyond having a set of individual objectives. To ensure each individual's objectives are aligned with the overall objectives means the individual must have an understanding of the bigger picture. For example, if the organisational objective is to achieve growth through new product development, the team objective might be to examine all existing products to identify potential new products and the each individual within the team might have an objective to discuss with end users how they use a particular product. Simply creating this objective for the individuals within the team would mean nothing. If on the other hand you create an environment where the individuals can understand the impact they will have and can understand how achieving their objective will contribute to the greater team and organisational objectives then they are more likely to achieve those objectives. They will achieve them because their objectives are aligned with those of the team and with those of the organisation.

Alignment requires effective internal communication. Those organisational objectives need to be known and understood by every person within the organisation. If they are not aware of the organisational objectives then they cannot align their individual objectives or their team

objectives. An organisation should have in place an internal communication strategy that ensures this information is available to all within the organisation. Possessing knowledge and understanding of the organisation vision and objectives should be an integral part of any appraisal process. More importantly aligning individual objectives with those of the team and also those of the organisation should be a part of any appraisal process. Individuals should be rewarded for their success in achieving alignment as well as for achieving objectives.

Alignment is more than setting objectives that are aligned throughout the organisation. For a team to be successful it has to be aligned to the strategy, the operational structure and the culture of the organisation. If the culture within an organisation is such that it stifles innovation then it is unlikely a team which has as an objective the introduction of new ideas will be able to achieve its goals. Such misalignment would create frustration amongst members of the team who in turn would lose their effectiveness. The culture of an organisation is set by the senior executive team as are the organisational objectives. For teams to be effectively aligned the senior executive team has to be aligned within itself; then other teams lower down in the organisation will be able to align with the senior executive team.

Exhibit 1 Strategic Alignment



Rick Seaman¹⁵ created the above diagram to illustrate the concept of strategic alignment in his article on aligning self-directed teams. It shows that alignment begins with knowledge and understanding of market conditions. This is the awareness of the current environment. The

organisational alignment follows from that knowledge. Misalignment is created when one of the factors other than market conditions is creating the agenda. This would be illustrated by one of the arrows being reversed.

Even if there were a perception lower in the organisation that the senior executive team members are not aligned with each other it would not be an excuse for team leaders to abdicate their responsibility for creating alignment within their team. It is preferable to understand the current environment and even be aware of potential misalignment than to blindly proceed without that understanding. Strategies can be created and implemented to minimize the impact of misalignment – if you are aware of the potential.

Actions for team leaders to help align their team –

- Ensure all team members know and understand the objectives of the organisation.
- Create a learning environment within your team; identify the knowledge required of the current environment.
- Ensure team members understand how their contribution will contribute to the overall objectives.
- Create a measurement system to measure how well objectives are understood and how well your team is aligned to those organizations.
- When appraising team members appraise them on their understanding of organisational, team and individual objectives.
- Reward team members for their actions in aligning themselves with the team objectives and for helping to align the team with organisational objectives.
- If other teams within the organisation are misaligned then form working partnerships with other strategic team leaders to set in place organisation-wide strategic alignment.

Vision, Vision, Vision

Effective leaders are visionary. They look forward to the future. Author and playwright, George Bernard Shaw is quoted as saying 'Some men see things as they are and say why; I see things as they never were and say why not.' These are the words of visionary leaders.

There is more to creating a vision than simply writing a statement on the whiteboard for others to view. A vision should be a living thing. The vision statement should be something to be lived. Effective visions are created out of knowledge and understanding not from dreams of the unknown.

Visions are not created by a single person – well, they can be created by an individual, however they need to be enacted by a team, therefore it is best to bring together the team; to have the team create the vision together. This suggests that prior to creating the vision you need to create the team and you need the right people to be in the team so that the vision they espouse is one they believe in and will work towards.

Good team members are those with an open mind, those that ask questions, and those that can view issues from different perspectives, those that can cooperate and collaborate. Sure, choose people who bring specialised technical knowledge or information but at the same time ensure they also display all the other qualities and competencies mentioned.

An effective vision will provide a guide as to the problem to be solved. A vision is something for your team to work towards; therefore if the vision is not tied into the problem to be solved then it

is useless as it directs people in the wrong direction. This means that the scope of the problem must be defined, that clear objectives have been set and that everyone understands the problem and the objectives.

A vision needs to be something to be reached for. If the vision appears ordinary and easily achievable then it may fail to attract attention. The team may have no real desire to reach for the vision. An effective vision takes the team away from where it is at present, however the vision must be based on knowledge and understanding. It cannot be a pie-in-the-sky vision. The next time you watch a one of the AFL greats playing football have a look at where they move to. The great players have vision of how the game will unfold. They run to where the ball is going, not to where it is.

Ask yourself what knowledge does your team have of the current situation? What assumptions are being made by the team? To gain this level of understanding your team must learn from those around them, customers, suppliers and competitors.¹⁶ By learning about now and by challenging their current assumptions the team will be able to create a true vision for the future.

Creating a vision for the future requires us to 'go back to the future'. In other words the team needs to be able to place itself into the future and look back at the present. A vision of the future is where we want to be not where we want to go. Charles Smith termed this ability the 'Merlin Factor'. Smith¹⁷ writes, *"The Merlin factor is the process whereby leaders transform themselves and the culture of their organization through a creative commitment to a radically different future."*

"Merlin-like leaders start with a personal vision of the organization's future that is predicated on assumptions which violate the shared reality of its existing culture."

Learn to describe the future in terms of what you want it to be. Be positive and proactive in your approach to creating a vision with your team. In looking back from the future to the present the team will be able to see the path it took to reach the future. It will be able to see the obstacles that were encountered and more importantly will be able to see that those obstacles were overcome. This is the true purpose of a vision. This process tells us also that creating a vision is only a part of the process of leading a successful team. How often have you created the vision *prior* to creating the team? How effective was the team in achieving that vision? Creating the vision is not the first thing you do as a leader, first of all you assemble the team and then let them create the vision.

Jeff Hiatt¹⁷ recommends that you guide your team through the process of creating a principle-centered vision. What are the basic beliefs and principles identified with regards to the organisation and the team as they learned developed their knowledge and understanding of the present? What are the underlying values within the organisation at present? When you ground the vision in these principles and values then it is likely the final outcome will match the vision.

As a team leader ask yourself the following questions.

- Do I have the best people on my team?
- Do these people bring with them the best mix of knowledge and competencies?
- Are we a learning team?
- Has the team worked together to formulate a vision?
- Are we in the present looking forward or in the future looking back?
- Is our vision grounded in the principles of the organisation?
- Is our vision realistic and credible?
- Is our vision easily understood?
- Does our vision energise the team?
- Does our vision provide guidance?

- Does our vision inspire and challenge the team to achieve?

What is effective communication?

Communication is an intentional act whereby one person attempts to move another person to action. Communication consists of three components. These are speaking, listening and body posture. When we communicate these components may be used individually or they may be used in various combinations.

Dictionaries tend to define communication in a relatively highbrow manner. For example, the Hyper dictionary has the following definition –

1. [n] something that is communicated by or to or between people or groups
2. [n] the activity of communicating; the activity of conveying information; "they could not act without official communication from Moscow"
3. [n] a connection allowing access between persons or places; "how many lines of communication can there be among four people?"

Sometimes communication is defined in simpler terms, such as –

1. How we speak
2. How we listen

The problem with simplistic definitions is that they fail to provide a comprehensive, and in-depth understanding; likewise the more formal definitions contained within dictionaries fail to convey the human aspect of communication, they deal mainly with the abstract concepts.

Within a team context communication is the glue that holds the team together. Team productivity and effectiveness is determined by how well people within a team communicate with each other. I will go even a step further and suggest that 'to communicate' is the reason for your employment within an organisation and hence your inclusion within a team is to help move information. To achieve that outcome you need to become an effective communicator.

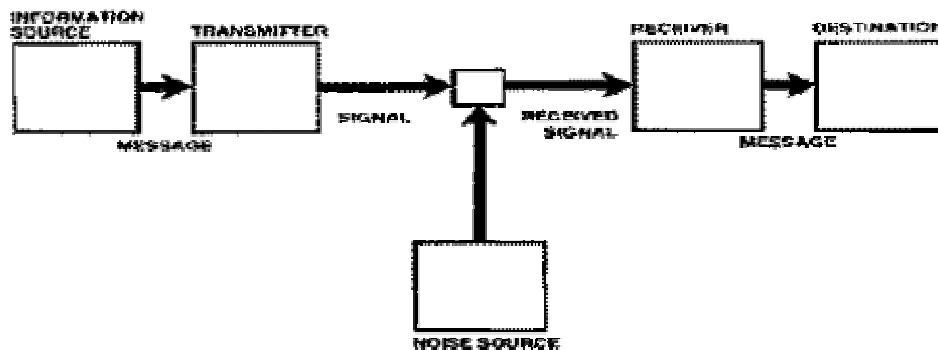
Communication consists of a number of elements. A model may contain all or any of these elements. The prime requirement of model for communication is that it is self-explanatory.

Elements of communication

- Message sender
- Message receiver
- The message
- How the message is sent
- How the message is received
- Interference in message transmission
- Types of message transmission
- The meaning of the message
- Perception
- Feedback
- Situation

The following model of communication illustrates the process of communicating.

The Shannon-Weaver Model



This model was originally devised by the Bell Telephone Laboratories to help examine the accuracy of message transmission. Copyright: *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Claude E. Shannon & Warren Weaver. Urbana, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1949. P. 9.

The Shannon-Weaver model represents the earliest attempts by researchers to model the process of communicating. This model has formed the basis of information theory for the past fifty years. In its simplistic form the Shannon-Weaver model suggests the 'transmitter' has some information that that he or she wishes to inform the 'receiver' about. Some commentators have suggested this simplistic perspective constitutes nothing more than a model of messaging rather than a model of communication.¹⁸

On the surface the Shannon-Weaver model appears to provide a satisfactory illustration of how communication takes place. But is the process of communicating really that simple? The Shannon-Weaver model suggest that the person transmitting the message encodes the message based upon their previous experience, and that the person receiving the message then decodes it, based upon their experience, so as to understand what is being transmitted.

On the surface this may appear to be what takes place during the communication process. However, let's examine communication from another perspective. In the 1950's, the philosopher John Austin suggested communication was in fact about '*action*'. When we act we exercise *power*. When we exercise power we in fact are *organizing* ourselves. This implies the purpose of communication is to organize others as well as ourselves; that the objective of effective communication is to move others to action. The implications of perceiving communication as 'an act of organisation' are considerable. When we view communication from this perspective we are no longer simply sending a message; we using communication as the prime means of organizing and moving our team to action.

When was the last time you took the time to sit and think about the process of communicating? The vast majority of us have never done so. We are not taught to communicate. We are born with the ability. Sure we are taught correct spelling and grammar but the act of communicating is intuitive. It is an ability that makes our species unique. The ability to become emotionally involved, to rationalize and to express in words our feelings and thoughts. We learn to communicate by mimicking the actions of others – which is why, so often, we communicate badly.

The reason we communicate badly is because we have in mind the incorrect outcome of any communication. Traditionally we communicate according to the Shannon-Weaver model; Person A transmits Message X to Person B. When we communicate in this manner we are simply trying to inform – we are ignoring the real rationale behind communication and that is to act in a way that causes others to act as well. Due to our misunderstanding of the real reason for communicating we effectively give out mixed messages. The person receiving the message intuitively understands that you are communicating with them so as to move them to action however the message they are receiving serves only to inform. The result is that confusion reigns

and whatever action that takes place, if any, is often not what the message sender expected. All this occurs because the person sending the message failed to understand the reason why we communicate; that is to create action.

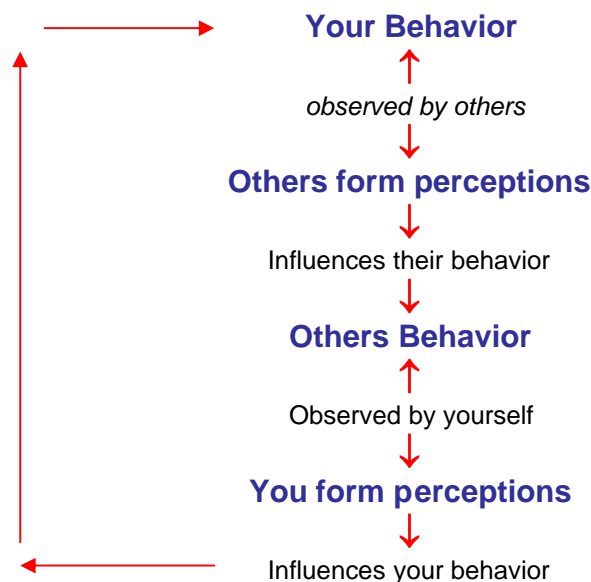
As a team leader how should you communicate? With honesty and integrity for a start! Communication is the core competency of your leadership. When was the last time you took time out prior to communicating with someone to consider how they will receive and interpret your message? If your objective is to move someone to action then surely it makes sense to transmit a message to them that achieves that outcome!

The responsibility for effective communication rests with the person sending the message. It is tempting to blame the receiver of the message for not asking questions to clarify your intent – however had you consider your intent *prior* to sending the message then there would be no need for clarification and you would have achieved your desired result much more quickly.

The key to effective communication is to *think* before you act. Ask yourself this. What is my desired outcome? What information do I need to communicate that will achieve this outcome? What is the most effective way to communicate this information? How will I know my message has been understood? Notice these are all things you, the team leader, can do to improve your communication.

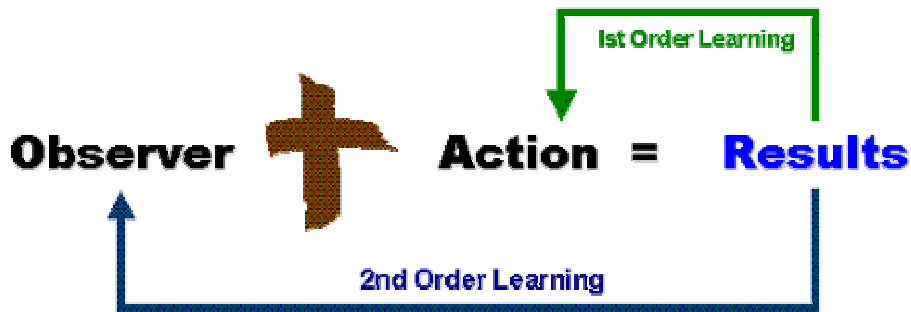
Firstly understand that members of your team are observing you constantly. They are watching how you behave and from those observations they form their own perceptions. These perceptions then influence the manner in which they behave. For example: If you make negative statements then the perception by your team members is likely to be that it is acceptable behavior to make such statements. If they do so and you then discipline them for doing so, they may perceive you as being hypocritical and therefore lacking credibility. These perceptions will stack up on top of each and may impact on their future behavior towards you. As you can see the relationship between perception and behavior is cyclical – it feeds itself. As the team leader you have a choice whether to create a negative self-feeding cycle or a positive self-feeding cycle.

The relationship between perception and behavior is illustrated below -



It follows that if you are to become an observer of behaviors then you should become an observer of your own behavior. This is where I get to make one of those unforgettable statements. If you want to change the way someone else behaves then firstly you must change the way you behave. If you continue to do the same old thing you will get the same old result! To change the way you behave you firstly must understand why you behave the way you do.

The following diagram¹⁹ illustrates the feedback loop involved in achieving behavioral change in others.



This diagram shows two feedback loops. The first loop is represented by 1st level learning. This is the traditional approach to achieving an outcome. The observer is you. Traditionally we act to achieve an outcome. When we fail to achieve the outcome we focus on changing the way in which we acted. Sometimes this effective; often it is not. The resulting outcome is often only partially changed or other issues are created in the process.

The second feedback loop represented by higher level learning suggests that *prior* to changing your behavior you should firstly examine the perceptions and beliefs that lead to your actions. By understanding *what* it is you are thinking, *where* those perceptions were formed and *how* they impact on your behavior, you are in a better position to decide on the most appropriate form of action. To change other's behavior you must first change how you behave as a manager.

Resist telling people how things should be done. Instead, tell them what needs to be done. You will be surprised at how creative their solutions will be.

Building trust

At the heart of effective communication is trust. Building trust is a visible activity. Trust is something others can witness. Trust comes from being seen to do the things you said you would do. Leadership operates around trust. Effective leaders make commitments to action and they do the things they say they will do. Their team members hear them make the commitment and see them act, and in turn, they trust their team leader.

Ask yourself these questions. How often have you made a commitment and not acted upon it? How often have you stated one thing and done another? If this is how you act then how can you expect members of your team to trust you? If this is the example you set then why should you expect your team members to act any differently?

Trust is earned it is not given by decree or by position or by title. Trust follows respect and respect is gained by setting standards and acting professionally at all times.

As a team leader you might ask yourself the following questions -

- Do I share the goals of my team?
- Do my team members share my goals?
- Do my team members have the required knowledge and ability to do what is asked of them?
- Do I honour my commitments?
- Do my team members honour their commitments?
- Do I want to share information with my team?
- Do my team members want to share information with each other?
- Do I want my team to succeed as a group?
- Do I want each individual within my team to be successful?

How did you answer those questions? Were you able to identify any gaps in how you go about developing trust of yourself and amongst your team members? If you answered in the negative to any of the above questions then you have some work to do. The next step is to identify what commitments you need to make and what actions you need to take to ensure you are able to answer the questions in the affirmative for the future.

Michael Maccoby²⁰ suggested that –

- People respond to good coaching, including communicating goals, responding to ideas, recognizing contributions and suggesting ways to improve individual performance and to develop as a whole person.
- A manager builds trust by "walking the talk," communicating and defending organizational values. This includes treating people with respect, standing with them when they deserve support, but also telling hard truths.

Becoming trusted as a leader and as a communicator requires you to focus on the *truth*. This sounds simple, however it isn't. Why isn't it simple? Because when we communicate we don't tell the truth! This is not to imply that we tell lies. To the contrary, when we communicate we do so by telling stories. These stories are our interpretation of events, our version of what we believe we observed or heard. The responsibility for an effective leader and communicator is to sort the facts from the fiction. To achieve this requires you to develop two very important communication competencies. The first is the ability to ask open-ended questions, to explore and drill down until you understand the facts. The second competency is the ability to listen actively. To actually hear the language and the words being used; to listen for the subtleties contained within a conversation. The leader who is seen to ask questions and to listen is the leader who earns respect and becomes trusted.

Conflict Management

You may notice I have used the term conflict management rather than conflict resolution. The reason for this is that conflict can never be eliminated. Some conflict is good for a team. It can help to promote creativity. Low levels of conflict created by a desire for parties to take conflict-avoiding actions can lead to poor communication and general ineffectiveness. Excessively low levels of conflict may be as counterproductive as excessively high levels of conflict. This suggests conflict management is more practical than trying to eliminate conflict all together. Conflict may be unpleasant it can also be an inevitable part of an organization organizing itself. Zero conflict can be as destructive to team productivity as full-blown aggressive conflict can be.

Conflict can lead to social change within an organization²¹. Conflict can also initiate cooperative problem solving. Conflict can help overcome organisational inertia, create organisational change,

improve decision making and make better use of resources²². The trick is to manage the conflict so that a balance between positive conflict and negative conflict is maintained.

The basis of conflict theory can be found in the ideas of Karl Marx²³. Marx made the observation that it is the contradictions within a system that become a force for change. Marx predicted that the change ultimately leads to the replacement of one social system with another. Sabini²⁴ proposed with his Realistic Conflict Theory that groups become prejudiced towards each other when they come into conflict over resources that are real, tangible and material. Even when cause of the conflict appears to be intangible it is likely to be otherwise in the minds of the individuals concerned. Understanding this is a key to helping resolve conflict.

Competition plays a significant part in conflict theory. Individuals and groups compete for resources. Competition represents a special kind of conflict – the incompatibility of goals. This underlines, once again, the importance of alignment throughout an organisation. It is, however, important not to confuse competition with conflict. Conflict can occur without competition being present²⁵.

Marx's ideas about contradiction can be placed into an organisational context by suggesting contradictions continually present themselves as alternatives to existing socially constructed realities – this is an ongoing process – in other words conflict within organizations is a constant. Understanding this concept is also important when considering solutions to conflict²².

If we accept that conflict within an organization is inevitable and that conflict leads to change and even to the introduction of new systems then it is possible that attempting to resolve conflict or even to manage it may not always be the appropriate strategy. This is not to suggest conflict should be left unattended, as that would be destructive, rather that as is suggested in Chaos Theory²⁶, whereby the 'cause and effect' of conflict leads to change within an organisation as people learn to adapt to the change. Sometimes 'going with the flow' can be more constructive than attempting to dam the flow or even redirect the flow. In this way the conflict transforms rather than disrupts as people learn to live with conflict and learn to work with it²⁷.

Vision and alignment are critical to reducing the potential for conflict within a team and between teams. Communication is critical to reducing interpersonal conflict. When team members know and understand where they are going and how they are going to get there then there is very little conflict regarding the process. When teams are aligned within the organisation then the potential for conflict over resources is reduced. Cooperation improves with well understood ground rules and good two-way communication.

Have you clearly defined the individual responsibilities for each team member? Doing so reduces the potential for conflict between individuals. Likewise ensure operational directions such as project length, timeframes, deadlines and standards are clearly defined. The less confusion offers less opportunity for individuals to take different routes.

Become an observer of how individuals within your team are behaving. There are many different types of conflict within a team. An individual may be experiencing some form of internal conflict which is affecting how they behave, it may be a conflict between two individuals, it may be a conflict between one individual and the remainder of the team or it may be a conflict between several team members. Unfortunately for you as the team leader the early signs of conflict will often be confusing and ambiguous and may not represent the real cause of conflict.

This is a further argument for team leaders to learn to sit back a while until they can identify the core issue(s). This doesn't mean team leaders should do nothing, to the contrary. It is at this point you get to practice your communication skills. The key communication competency is the ability to listen; to listen you first have to be able to ask questions. This is your role as the team leader, to ask questions, to dig deeper into the issue and to establish the facts in an enquiring, non-judgmental manner.

The reality is that the majority of team leaders don't go through this discovery process, then tend to confuse identifying the issue with resolving the issue. They are not the same. The outcome of this is that they either avoid conflict resolution all together or they attack the issue in an aggressive manner. Both of these approaches indicate the team leader has not developed the communication skills needed for effective conflict resolution.

The other problem team leaders experience when resolving disputes is they focus on personalities rather than observed behavior. Personalities are emotion-laden; there can be no right or wrong with personality's only differences of opinion. You should focus on what you have observed or heard. This is the outcome of the discovery process. When you focus on observed behavior then you are focusing on the facts – the truth. Remember also you are the leader of a team. Unless the conflict is between two individuals then it is likely to involve other members of the team. Involving the team members as a group within the resolution process will help achieve an outcome that all the team is committed to.

Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan²⁸ have suggested that a successful team will:

- be comfortable dealing with conflict
- be committed to resolving disputes close to the source
- resolve disputes based on interests before rights and power
- learn from experience with conflicts.

How do you ensure your team is comfortable dealing with conflict? Create an environment based around a team vision and team values, where conversation between individuals is paramount, where the focus is on team behavior and common good.

How do you resolve disputes close to the source? Put in place a discover process. Be an observer of how you behave and how others behave. Understand the facts and address them in an assertive manner.

A team works together for a common good. They share a vision of the future. Conflict resolution should focus on achieving an outcome for the common good, based upon the interests of the team rather than the interests of the individual.

A client once asked me, how will I know when I am an effective manager? My response was, "When you can look back and learn from your experiences". The ability to apply critical analysis to your own actions is the sign of an experienced and learning team leader. Ignoring a conflict or avoiding attempts at resolution not only ensues the conflict will become unmanageable it also ensues you will not learn from the experience; and you will not develop the competencies of an effective team leader.

As a team leader you should seek to have in place –

- A framework consisting of team vision, values, operational guidelines, roles and responsibilities
- A process for resolving conflict that has escalated beyond the basic intervention and assertive communication
- High level communication skills

Strategies for building a productive team

Model the behavior you expect of others – as the team leader you should behave in the manner you expect others to behave – be seen to lead. Adopt a facilitator management style rather than 'command and control'. Teams function effectively when the team leader helps others to achieve their objectives. Become a coach rather than a manager. Adopt the 'FACTS' model of cooperative teamwork.

Follow through – Do the things you say you will do. Trust is a visible act. Within a team everything did by someone everyone impacts somewhere on everyone else.

Accuracy – When team members interact with each other every mistake made has a detrimental impact – getting it right the first time reduces wastage and improves productivity.

Creativity – There is only one thing more certain than change and that is the need to be creative, to focus on the solution rather than on the problem. Encourage creativity like your life depends upon it – because it does!

Timeliness – Understand the time frames and operational guidelines. Respect other people's time and don't waste theirs or your own. Prioritise work. Be punctual.

Spirit – Learn to give as much as you take. Teamwork is about working towards common goals, together. Share your knowledge, help others share their knowledge. Share the team successes and provide support during times of trouble.

Create the team first – choose the best people who in turn bring to the team the skills and attributes you need

Let the team create – their vision, their values and their objectives. As a group they will buy into something they have had a hand in creating.

Have in place – well defined operational guidelines and timeframes. Ensure everyone within the team understands their role and responsibilities.

Align – ensure individual team member objectives are aligned with the objectives of the team – ensure the team objectives are aligned with those of the organisation.

Become an observer – of behavior within the team. Be aware firstly of your own behavior as the team leader. What perceptions are others forming of your behavior? Be proactive in identifying potential conflict. Know and understand every member of your team, their individual interests, their behavior, what motivates them and how they act under stress.

Develop and practice – higher level communication competencies. Communication is at the heart of an effective team. Create an environment where conversation between individuals is paramount and where the sharing of information is the norm. Use assertive communication to help resolve conflict. Use constructive feedback to improve performance. Provide positive reinforcement and feedback on achievement.

Cultivate diversity – a team consists of many different personalities, perspectives and viewpoints. Create an environment where diversity is encouraged and incorporated into the decision making process within the team.

Manage conflict – never, never, never avoid resolving conflict. To do so creates an incorrect perception amongst team members. Remember you will never eliminate conflict – learn to

manage conflict in a positive manner so as to benefit from any creative ideas that may emerge – yet do not allow conflict to become destructive. Have in place a process for resolving conflict and ensure all team members are aware of and understand the process.

Assess your team's effectiveness

Self rate your team, or provide this assessment form to all your team members for their input. Rate each question from 1 to 5. A low score in any of these areas will provide an indication of where you may need to work on your team's effectiveness.

- 1: My team members have a shared vision that they are committed to _____
- 2: Do your team members bring the skills and experience needed? _____
- 3: The team has clearly defined operational guidelines _____
- 4: Individual team member roles and responsibilities have been defined _____
- 5: Individual objectives have been aligned with those of the team _____
- 6: Team objectives have been aligned with those of the organisation _____
- 7: Team members are working towards the common interests of the team _____
- 8: Information is shared throughout the team _____
- 9: Diversity of opinion and experience is encouraged _____
- 10: As team leader you ask questions and listen _____
- 11: As team leader you know and understand each member of your team _____
- 12: Conflict is managed in a positive manner _____

This white paper has been prepared by the team at John Coxon & Associates – *we create collaborative workspaces within the health sector and not-for-profit sector*. We achieve this by helping your organization implement a range of effective management strategies. If you would like to discuss how we might help your organisation please contact John Coxon on +61 (0427) 390 376 or email consulting@iprimus.com.au

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