Team Communication: It's in the Cards

By Jeff Pettit

IN MAKING THE TRANSITION to a team environment, team members need many new skills in group decision making, leadership, conflict resolution, and performance feedback.

One area in which skills are also required is communications, which affects all of these areas. A team leader develops both intra- and inter-team communications. Members within the team need to learn how to communicate with each other, other teams, and the rest of the company.

There are several different types of communications networks in most organizations. In a typical hierarchy, a manager tells a staff member what to do and how to do it. That form of communications network is called a star, an inverted Y, or a chain. The flow of communications is usually one way—from upper management down. Company policies and directives follow that information flow.

Those kinds of networks support centralization and the emergence of leaders, but they tend to rate low in areas of satisfaction. A team environment cannot function efficiently under such networks. What works better are the circle or all-channel networks in which each team member can communicate with his or her peers. That way, information is passed to all members, and everyone is kept up-to-date on changes and procedures. Communications in that form helps increase levels of satisfaction within the team and with individual team members.

Communications within a team environment still invoke unique challenges. During team meetings, how long do you discuss an issue before trying to reach an answer? Some members are ready quickly, while others are still deciding. A long discussion can create long meetings. Additionally, how do you get everyone to participate in the discussion and the voting? Some people are content to sit quietly on the side and let others dictate the action. For teams in which members are separated physically or work in different shifts, how do they communicate operationally or administratively with their peers? With teams working in different shifts, how do they get information about company policies or talk with off-shift managers? Let's explore how such issues are handled at two different facilities.

Rockwell card system. The Test and Metrology Services department of the Collins Commercial Avionics division of Rockwell International in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, operates as a self-directed team. The team primarily provides test-equipment calibration and repair support to try out equipment users according to calibration-system requirements and customer demands for the various electronic systems manufactured at the facility.

Team technicians have a high technical expertise that enables them to support their customers. The team is composed of 20 members with a lab manager as the linchpin to upper management. An early issue the team had to overcome was its long weekly meetings. Even with a set agenda, the meetings exceeded the allotted time. Many members had to leave early to satisfy customer demands.

Based on input from the team members, a card system was devised to help speed up discussions. Two 8-by-10-inch cards are passed out to each member at the beginning of a meeting. Each side is color-or-coded and inscribed with words. (See Card Method illustration.) The colors red and green are on one card; white and yellow are on the other. When an issue is brought before the team, it is explained by the team facilitator. During his or her initial explanation, all team members display the red "needs discussion" card.

If someone wants to talk about the issue, he or she shows a white "need to talk" card to the facilitator, who recognizes the card holder. As the discussion progresses and team members make a decision on the issue, they change their cards to a green "ready to vote" card or one of the other options. The cards provide feedback to the facilitator and to team members as to who needs additional information on the issue. The facilitator terminates the discussion only when no more red "needs discussion" cards are displayed.

Based on the cards presented, the facilitator then formulates a voting action for the issue. When voting, team members can agree (green card), can be neutral (white card), can support (yellow card)—even if they do not like it, or can disagree (red card). The first three responses allow consensus on any issue. The team members also can hold up a yellow "to task team" card that indicates more information is required. (See Example of Card Usage on page 13.)

"The card system has increased dramatically team members' discussion and participation," says George Fluharty, lab manager. "The cards have cut down on the length of meetings and provided each team member with a chance to voice his or her opinion."

Another advantage to the system is that everyone votes. No issue is dropped until the facilitator views each member's card. Additionally, the cards have helped reduce side discussions

and disruptive noise during meetings.

The cards have also reduced the time team members spend discussing issues, because they show when they are ready to move ahead. The cards are also an easy way to see which team members desire to talk, instead of everyone talking simultaneously.

The card system does have some disadvantages. On some issues, team members form an opinion quickly and show their answers before a discussion is completed. The system also lends itself to subtle, nonverbal communications.

For instance, laying the cards on a table may signal nonverbally a member's opinion on a certain subject. To stop that from happening, team members have suggested that the cards remain in their laps until an action is requested. And during meetings, side discussions can be conducted only with the cards.

Genecor e-mail system. Genecor International in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, began as a greenfield site in 1990. The facility uses self-directed teams to manufacture industrial enzymes and biochemicals. Each self-directed team is composed of 12 members, who have complementary skills making products. The teams work in rotating 12-hour shifts. One team is sufficient to operate the plant. To improve communications between the late-shift team, the other teams, and management, Genecor installed the office

system cc:mail by Microsoft, and trained teams on how to use it. Computer terminals in every location help team members access communications or other data.

"Part of the orientation for new members," explains Margie Harvey, human resource manager, "involves learning how to use e-mail and the proper netiquette." Each team member has an individual address and can send information not only within the plant, but also to the other Genecor facilities worldwide. Each team has its own mail list, and team members can create their own private lists.

Genecore also developed electronic bulletin boards for local and worldwide use. Each board has one owner, who is the only person allowed to make changes. Local boards cover team activities, technical information, and plant policies. One local board contains all of the company's human resource guidelines, and the team's mission statements and members' names. The board, in effect, supplements the employee handbook. The worldwide boards contain corporate policies, job postings, a library of journals and technical manuals, and information on research and development.

Advantages to system. There are many advantages to this type of communications system. One, it is easy to operate and user-friendly. But the primary reason that it's used is that it increases communications and helps inform and involve everyone. It also cuts down on meetings and ensures a better understanding of the issues. Anyone can use e-mail to inform team members about corporate or plant changes, and to dispel rumors on the grapevine. Using e-mail also lessens the need for long-distance phone calls to the other facilities. And it reduces the amount of paper used for producing documents.

EXAMPLE OF CARD USAGE

Team member 1:	Show (white) Need To Talk
Facilitator:	Yes, team member 1?
Team member 1:	Our current printer can't handle the type of forms now required by customer A. We need to upgrade or purchase a new printer. I have investigated several printers that would be adequate, and have the prices and technical data with me.
Team member 2:	Showing (white) Need To Talk
Facilitator:	Yes, team member 2?
Team member 2:	What is our budget to date and was any provision made for new equipment?
Lab manager:	Showing (white) Need To Talk
Facilitator:	Yes, lab manager?
Lab manager:	The budget is $XYZ and no provision was set for new equipment.
Team member 3:	Showing (yellow) To Task Team
Facilitator:	Yes, team member 3?
Team member 3:	I think we should send this to our software task team for resolution.
Facilitator:	Is there any other discussion (no white Need To Talk or Needs Discussion cards)? Let's vote on team member 3's proposal to forward the issue of a new printer to our task team.
All team members:	Showing (green) Agree.
Facilitator:	Next item!

CARD METHOD

Disagree red Needs Discussion	**Neutral** white Need To Talk
Agree green Ready To Vote	**Can Support** yellow To Task Team

There are a few drawbacks. The biggest one is that reading an e-mail message is different from delivering a verbal message. Did the receiver interpret the message correctly? Occasionally, people are concerned that feedback is delayed due to system problems, responder lag time, or a receiver's inability to type. In this particular system, users can't send messages anonymously.

Despite the disadvantages, team members think the system has improved communications, and they use it constantly. The plant has several portable computers that team members and managers can take with them on business trips to still communicate with their teams. Many team members also network with the plant through their home computers.

Although it is a useful system, it does not replace face-to-face communications. Team meetings continue to be the most critical form of communications. Every day at 8 a.m., there is a brief meeting of all plant workers. During this 10-minute briefing, problems, process changes, future activities, maintenance requirements, special labs, and information from other teams are shared. Notes of the daily meetings are recorded on a chalkboard and retained for three days for all shifts to read. Each of the process and technical teams meets daily to discuss events in more detail and make necessary decisions. Additionally, "component" teams (teams for hiring, shift selection, training, and so forth) meet monthly, or as needed, to examine issues requiring attention. Minutes from the various team meetings are transcribed to files and put into the e-mail system for interested team members—another benefit of using internal electronic mail.

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