

REGENT UNIVERSITY

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION CASE STUDY:
KNOWLEDGE TEAM LEADERSHIP

SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES
LMOL665 ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a case study that illustrates organizational communication problems pertaining to teams and the work they do. These communication problems inhibit effective teamwork, but a good team leader anticipates that these problems occur and prepares to mitigate them; indeed, a wise team leader plans to leverage these situations to build teamwork and an environment that provides opportunities for team breakthroughs to occur.

Krisco (1997) defines a breakthrough as “results beyond what you typically get or normally expect” (p. 129). Teams that produce breakthroughs are high performance teams. This case study examines several aspects of team communication that have the potential to make or break conditions for breakthroughs to occur.

The case study consists of these components:

Problem Statement. This section describes high performance teams and the importance of effective communication, draws a relationship to relevant communication theories, and presents the leadership challenge of the case study.

Case Study Organizational Background. This section provides brief background information about the organization and the project that is the subject of the case study.

Case Study Participants. This section describes the project team roles and the people who participate as project team members.

Case Study Scenario. This section presents a story consisting of four events that illustrate aspects of communication problems within the context of project team activities.

Case Study Questions. This section poses a series of questions for each of the four events in the case study scenario for the reader to consider.

Answers to the Case Study Questions. This section proposes answers to the questions posed for each of the four events in the case study scenario. The purpose of the questions and answers is to facilitate discussion about the case study scenario and the communication problems.

Conclusion. This section summarizes the results of the case study and makes final observations.

II

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This section describes the communication problems that the case study illustrates and relates them to relevant communication theories.

Effective Communication is Critical to High Performance Teams

One of the critical success factors in team effectiveness is the ability to communicate. Nash (1999) describes a model of communication where teams that achieve a peak level of communication performance have a high likelihood of producing exceptional results. McGrath (1996) puts it this way: "The secret to successful [knowledge] teams lies in organizing them to achieve effective communication, coordination, and decision making." (p. 45). Extraordinarily effective communication within a team must exist in order to achieve the breakthroughs characteristic of high performance teams.

Lowther and Marshall (1997) state "[T]he factors showing the greatest difference between the most effective and least effective teams are the 'soft' team dynamics and process factors." Their research shows that trust, goodwill, and cooperation as well as leadership factors, rather than technical skill of team members, are the most significant determinants of team success. Effective communication underlies and enables all these team effectiveness factors.

Team Maturation Model

Tuckman's well-known four stage team development model is useful to characterize the challenge that a team leader faces in guiding or facilitating maturation of a team. The four stages of the Tuckman model are: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Chapman, 2005).

In the forming stage, a team is highly dependent upon its leader to establish direction. There is a great deal of uncertainty about the team's objectives, the roles individual team members

fulfill, the way in which everyone works together, the team processes that need to be established, etc. Team members have lots of questions, but little shared understanding.

In the storming stage, a team is struggling with their interactions with each other and to fully understand the team's mission. Conflict is frequent between team members as they challenge each other, figure out their roles, work through issues, and learn how to work together.

In the norming stage, a team is establishing their individual roles, how they work together, and the routine and rhythm of team life. The team leader often begins to act as facilitator for the team and shared leadership emerges amongst the team. The team is reaching clarity around team objectives and processes.

In the performing stage, a team is completely clear about their objectives. They have a compelling vision they are driving toward, and need very little leadership as they are capable of leading themselves. Disagreements occur, but become opportunities for win-win resolution and team learning. Breakthroughs begin to happen; this stage is where high performance teams operate.

High Performance Teams and Communication Theory

Aspects of several communication theories relate to and support communication effectiveness as a key enabler of high performance teams, and can help understand the problems and solutions presented by the case study.

Conversational Communication Theory

Littlejohn and Foss (2005) describe several related communication theories about conversation. One is *symbolic convergence theory* which describes how people create shared understanding and purpose through a series of individual conversational interactions ("fantasy themes"). These smaller interactions combine to form a larger contextual meaning ("rhetorical vision"). This is

analogous to how a stage play assembles characters, dialogue, and plot lines into a scenes that form acts and present an overall message that is significant and meaningful to the audience.

Another conversational communication theory is *meaningful engagement practice*. This theory represents conversation between individuals as more than a simple exchange of information; conversation creates shared meaning and purpose between participants (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005). Krisco (1997) similarly states that leaders create a preferred future and actualize leadership through conversations with their constituents.

Given that interaction through conversation establishes shared meaning and purpose, a leader can deliberately create such situations and interactions and build the conditions for high performance teams to thrive.

Group Communication Theory

There is also a set of communication theories about how groups accomplish tasks and form working relationships (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005). Nearly all these group communication theories represent that groups effective in task accomplishment also have good interpersonal relationships. Groups are not effective at accomplishing their task when good interpersonal relationships in the group do not exist. In effective groups, people balance their expenditure of energy on accomplishing tasks and maintaining relationships. Rather than addressing individually, task and relational activity within a group are intermixed on an ongoing basis.

An additional aspect of group communication theory is *interest in effectiveness* (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005). These theories are practical in nature and help understand how effective groups operate. Typically, these theories are consistent with the task-relationship distinction and provide implementation ideas and guidelines as well as characterize individual skills for effective group communication. Useful skills for members of effective groups are differentiated into task skills,

relational skills, and procedural skills. Task skills include problem solving, analytical thinking, creativity, and argumentation. Relational skills include leadership, conflict resolution, and building an environment in which good interpersonal relationships can develop and flourish. Procedural skills include planning and establishing effective group processes.

Given that group effectiveness involves both task and relationship orientation, a leader can deliberately create such situations and interactions and build the conditions for high performance teams to thrive. Similarly, a leader can also create experiences to build necessary task, relational, and procedural skills that high performance teams need.

Case Study Challenge

Teams sometimes take extended periods of time to move through the forming, storming, and norming before they reach the performing stage. The overarching challenge of the project team in this case study is accelerating the maturation of the team to reach the performing stage thus positioning the team to achieve breakthroughs. To accomplish this, the team leader must create a team environment where effective communication occurs and the team can establish processes that enable the growth of the team.

The case study views the project team at a point in time where the team is struggling with various problems in the storming state. The case study then asks the reader to discern root causes and consider appropriate action for the team leader to take that helps the team deal with their problems so that they can move into the performing stage.

III

CASE STUDY ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

This section provides brief background information about the organization, the project, and the project that is the subject of the case study.

The Organization

The project that is the subject of this case study is a software development project with the objective of producing software for use by a business unit to address particular business problems and opportunities. The company is a one hundred year old company that is a leading provider of energy and energy services across the United States. The company has about ten thousand employees while the information technology organization consists of about 700 people with a software development staff of about 450.

The Project

The energy trading business unit is aggressively pursuing deals where the company acts as a broker buying bulk energy contracts from third party businesses operating electricity generating plants and producing oil, gas, and coal. The company in turn enters into contracts to sell energy to major commercial energy consumers. There are significant profit opportunities due to the differential between what the company is able to purchase bulk energy contracts and what individual energy consumers are willing to pay, potential transaction volumes, and the deregulated marketplace which tends to place traditional regional energy suppliers at a cost disadvantage. This is a new line of business both for the company and the marketplace, so the business unit is figuring out how it all has to work as the project proceeds. The company is already closing deals and anticipates competitive pressure soon.

The business requires a computer system that is capable of tracking energy supplier contract commitments, energy consumer contract commitments, actual energy production, and

actual consumption. The computer system compares actual energy generation and actual consumption to the contractual terms and conditions and creates invoices for both the energy producers and the energy consumers. The company cannot do business in this market without the computer system because of the complexities in the contractual arrangements; indeed, the computer system provides a strategic advantage to the company because competitors do not yet have this capability. The business goal is for the project team to deliver this software system within six months.

The project team employs an approach known as *progressive elaboration*. Progressive elaboration is an iterative and incremental approach where deliverable characteristics are defined broadly at first then made more explicit and detailed as the effort continues (PMI, 2004). This approach delivers intermediate but meaningful results in short periods of time. Each effort builds upon its predecessor as well as provides for frequent priority adjustments so that changes yielding the most relevant benefits get addressed in a timely manner. Project software release milestones consist of multiple intervals made up of several weeks each.

The combination of a critical business need, a short delivery time, uncertainty of exact business rules, and frequent incremental delivery cycles pressures the team to be effective. The need is for the project team to become a high performance team as quickly as possible.

IV

CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

There are many stakeholders involved in the project such as an executive sponsor, a steering committee, technology infrastructure support organizations, hardware and software vendors as well as the third party businesses with which the company enters into buy and sell contractual relationships. This section describes the project team roles and the people who participate as project team members.

Team Roles

The case study depicts a core project team that consists of these roles: project manager, software developer, requirements analyst/tester, and business subject matter expert.

The project manager is the team leader and acts as the boundary manager assisting the team in dealing with the other project stakeholders. The project manager is responsible and accountable for the overall performance of the project team in its achievement of project team objectives.

The software developer creates computer programs that implement the business rules for the computer system. The software developer works with the requirements analyst/tester and the business subject matter expert to gain a proper understanding of business needs and writes as well as tests computer programs.

The requirements analyst/tester determines detail business requirements, develops business test cases, and verifies that the computer system works according to the business requirements. The requirements analyst/tester works with the business subject matter expert to understand business requirements, and works with the software developer to verify proper operation of the software.

The business subject matter expert has a detailed understanding of the business needs for the energy trading operation, and acts as the liaison to other experts in the business unit. The business subject matter expert works with the requirements analyst/tester to ensure that the computer system meets business needs.

Although team members have primary roles that are based upon the particular skills they bring to the team, the team collaborates as necessary to ensure overall success. As a result, roles are emergent and team members participate in various roles at any given point in time.

Team Members

Lenny Leader is the project manager. Lenny is an experienced and successful computer software project manager. Lenny has received advanced training for leading high performance knowledge teams, but is applying these advanced concepts in a project for the first time.

There are three software developers. Sean Silencio is a young but experienced and effective software developer. Sean is relatively new to the company and not very familiar with its culture and traditions. Billy Bluntwords is also an experienced software developer, but doesn't have a great deal of experience with all of the technology that the project is using. Billy has been a company employee for decades, knows everyone, and understand how things get done within the bureaucratic organizational structure. Mary Meetnot is a software developer experienced in all the technologies that the project is using, and has been around the company for many years.

Sally Sensitive is the requirements analyst/tester on the team. Sally is very experienced, understands the business, and has a good working relationship with the business subject matter expert.

Ike Insight is the business subject matter expert. Ike has the necessary knowledge of the business operation and enjoys the confidence of the business as well as the project team.

Team Processes

The project team has established several routines that are proving effective in the work the team is doing (for the most part).

The team has a daily team meeting at 10 o'clock. The purpose of the daily team meeting is to ensure the team is focused on the right things and to provide a basis for collaboration amongst team members to occur.

The team established a goal of delivering functioning software for the requirements analyst/tester to test at the beginning of each day. Each such delivery of software for testing includes the work that the team accomplished during the previous day. It was a difficult challenge to get this complex process working, and the team is happy now that it is operating even though they are still ironing out issues.

Within a software release schedule, there are four interim delivery cycles of three weeks each. A software release culminates in delivery of a version of the computer system for production use. The team participates in a planning exercise at the beginning of each release and at the beginning of each three week delivery cycle to establish specific deliverables. Although the team has not been together long, they are beginning to feel a comfortable rhythm to the project work.

CASE STUDY SCENARIO

This section presents a story consisting of four events that illustrate aspects of communication problems within the context of project team activities. The next section poses a series of questions for each of the four events for the reader to consider. The section after that proposes answers to the questions posed for the case study scenario..

The project team has been in place for nearly two months and is struggling to become an effective and high performing team. Several incidents within the team over the last few weeks exemplify the problems with which the team is struggling.

Making a Team Decision

Two weeks ago in the daily team meeting, the team surfaced an issue around adjusting the team process for delivering the software system for testing by the requirements analyst/tester and business subject matter experts. This issue was important to resolve quickly as it was causing delays in the ability of the team to deliver software for testing. During the meeting, the team was able to identify the root cause of the problem and collaborated to arrive at a viable solution approach.

The role of Lenny Leader in this meeting was to act as a facilitator during the technical problem solving session and to guide the team towards resolution. It seemed to Lenny and the team that they successfully accomplished resolution due to apparent agreement on the part of the technical team.

The solution required that the technical team adjust the steps involved in the process and that all team members conduct the process in the same way. After over a week of operating the new process, the same problem reoccurred. Lenny's investigation revealed that Sean Silencio

was not following the steps to which the team apparently agreed. Upon discussing the situation with Sean, Lenny learned that Sean didn't believe that the solution the team arrived at would solve the problem. Sean decided to test an alternate approach to the process on his own.

Regardless of the merit of Sean's alternate approach, the inconsistency in the process the team is using caused the problem to reoccur. Now the team was back at the same point they were over a week ago discussing the problem again and trying to arrive at the best solution.

Dealing with an Unmet Expectation and Interpersonal Conflict

Last week, Lenny discovered an incident of interpersonal conflict between two of the team members that was causing some hurt feelings and resentment that was affecting the ability to focus and be most productive.

After stewing on the problem for over a week, Sally Sensitive came to Lenny complaining about how she had been wronged by Billy Bluntwords. Apparently, Sally had asked Billy to provide a solution to a problem that was critical to the deliverable that Sally had committed to. Sally understood that Billy would provide the solution in time, but when the time came Billy had no solution and claimed he had never committed to providing the solution. This caused Sally's deliverable to be significantly late, and Sally felt wronged and deeply hurt by Billy's behavior.

Sally had tried to talk to Billy about the incident, but Billy reacted defensively by denying any wrongdoing. Sally now demanded that Lenny handle the situation by letting Billy know that his behavior was wrong, that an apology was necessary, and that he needed to change his behavior. Lenny believes that conflict is healthy and its resolution represents opportunity for the team, but is concerned about getting meaningful closure with this particular situation in a win-win fashion for all involved.

Improving the Productivity of Team Meetings

The day before yesterday, Mary Meetnot approached Lenny to complain that some team meetings were a waste of time because very little was accomplished. Mary pointed out that sometimes meetings seemed to have no leader (especially when Lenny was not in attendance), often there was no agenda, discussion seemed to wander even when there was important work to accomplish, and that the decisions and conclusions reached by the team frequently were rehashed in subsequent meetings.

Lenny had noticed that Mary seemed disengaged from the group during some meetings rarely contributed anything of substance. Mary felt that she could be much more productive by skipping the meetings in general and instead focusing on the delivery of her work (especially since the project was under such schedule pressure).

Hitting Team Milestones

Today the team reached a scheduled milestone, and several important deliverables that the team had discussed and committed to were not completed. As the team talked about it, it became apparent that some team members had different ideas about what they were trying to do, and other team members were confused about what the team was trying to accomplish as a whole as well as what the necessary incremental steps were.

Lenny sensed the team's discouragement, and that team energy and morale was very low. The team was feeling the pressure to deliver, and was feeling frustration over their struggles.

Ike Insightful approached Lenny after the meeting and offered his observations. The team was working very hard in a seemingly never ending push toward delivering results, yet there seemed to be no break in the action. Ike was wondering how much longer the team could sustain the pace.

VI

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

As Lenny thought about these issues and the most effective way to deal with them, he realized that the project team was stuck in the storming stage of team development even though the team had been working together for two months. Lenny realized that he must act quickly to identify root causes of these team issues and implement corrective action if the team was to reach the performing stage of team development and have any hope of achieving breakthroughs that would result in enabling the business to accomplish their goals. This section poses questions about each aspect of the case study scenario to consider. The next section proposes answers to these questions.

Making a Team Decision

How would you characterize the root cause of the misunderstanding about the process that the team apparently agreed to follow? What behavior in the team caused the misunderstanding and why did it occur? How could the team avoid such misunderstandings in the future?

Dealing with an Unmet Expectation and Interpersonal Conflict

Why was Sally's expectation not met by Billy? How could Sally and Billy avoid such misunderstandings in the future? How could Sally effectively deal with her hurt feelings? Who has what responsibilities in resolving the interpersonal conflict between Sally and Billy? What could the team learn from this situation and what could the team do to avoid similar misunderstandings and to effectively handle interpersonal conflict between team members?

Improving the Productivity of Team Meetings

How could the daily team meeting be made more productive and what should be done about it? Who has responsibility for making the meeting productive? When a team member is unable to participate in a meeting, who has what responsibility for ensuring that the participant receives any information presented in the meeting that they may need? What is the obligation of a participant when they find that they are not in a position to contribute value and are not receiving value? What could the team do to ensure the productivity of its meetings?

Hitting Team Milestones

How important to success is a team's understanding of their objectives? What can a team leader do to facilitate a team understanding and clarifying their objectives? What could the team do to ensure that it has a proper understanding of its objectives? What could be done to establish meaningful breaks in the action where the team could pause, reflect, and recharge? What could be done to increase the team's focus and energy expending on relationships?

VII

ANSWERS TO CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

This section presents answers to the case study questions posed in the preceding section for the purpose of facilitating discussion about the case study scenario and the communication problems.

Making a Team Decision

The project team is experiencing the effects from a lack of a clear team decision making process. It is not unusual within a team for a team member to be reluctant to voice a dissenting opinion, especially when a team has yet to establish an environment when members feel safe in expressing themselves. In such a situation, a team member often remains silent, and an experienced team leader knows that silence is NOT consent.

There are several decision making models that a team can employ (Decision Making, 2003). These include autocratic (one person makes the decision), democratic (each person gets one vote, and the majority rules), consultative (one person makes the decision after soliciting advice and suggestions from others), and consensus (all team members agree on a course of action). Avery (2004) defines consensus as “100% agreement to MOVE FORWARD together” (p. 5). Consensus is often the most appropriate decision-making method for high performing teams, especially when the decision impacts the team as a whole.

The team can avoid such misunderstandings in the future by deliberately adopting the consensus method for team decision making. Avery (2004) suggests the following process for establishing consensus in a team:

1. Check for consensus when you hear someone make a proposal. State that you thought you heard a proposal, and ask the person who made the proposal to restate it.

2. Call for a consensus check within the team using the “thumb method.” Everyone must respond in one of three ways:

Thumbs UP: indicates agreement with the proposal.

Thumbs SIDEWAYS: indicates that consent or agreement to move forward.

Thumbs DOWN: indicates disagreement with moving forward.

3. Facilitate moving the group forward by:

ALL Thumbs UP: record the decision and move on.

ANY Thumbs DOWN: ask the dissenters how to modify the proposal such that they would consent.

ANY Thumbs sideways: ask the consenters if the team should move forward or if they think the team can gain total agreement with a little more discussion.

Dealing with an Unmet Expectation and Interpersonal Conflict

Making indirect requests rather than asking clearly for exactly what you want is a common source of problems in getting things accomplished. Receiving a proper response from a request is just as critical.

It may seem obvious that making requests of others is essential to accomplishing a desired outcome; however, deliberately making requests in a proper form is powerful when working with others. Making a proper request consists of saying exactly what is desired, exactly when it is desired, and from whom it is desired. Making the request is only half of the conversation. The other half is ensuring receipt of a proper reply. There are only four proper replies: accept, decline, counteroffer, and promise to reply later. Often, an improper response to the request is received: the non-response. People are experts at avoiding requests, but a non-

response can easily be overcome with follow-up questions such as “Does that mean you’ll do it?” (Krisco, 1997).

Merriam-Webster (www.m-w.com) defines *confront* as meeting face-to-face. The ability to confront others in a non-challenging way is a critical communication skill as it enables you to deal with conflict. When a misunderstanding causes an emotional response, it’s important to provide feedback to diffuse the situation, come to a common understanding, gain agreement about changing behavior, and eliminate any harboring of resentment that can detrimentally affect a relationship and the effectiveness of the team. Avery (2004) proposes a model for giving feedback responsibly:

1. Check in. Consider your own feelings so that you know where you’re at emotionally.
2. Be invited. Ask permission to give feedback, and determine a time that is appropriate.
3. Be explicit. Report on an observed behavior, trying not to attribute any value judgment (assumptions about intent or a right/wrong evaluation based on your own interpretation of the behavior).
4. Be causal. Describe the impact of the observed behavior on yourself or others involved in the situation. Describe any conclusions you made (assumptions about intent or a right/wrong evaluation based on your own interpretation of the behavior).
5. Be open. Ask for agreement about the observation, the impact, and the assumptions. STOP and listen carefully to what the person has to say.
6. Be responsible. Ask for what you want different in the future.

Being responsible requires that one take responsibility for the quality of their personal relationships (Avery, 2004). When a team member experiences difficult behavior from a teammate, it’s not unusual to expect the team leader to resolve the situation. A team leader

encourages responsible behavior and development of critical interpersonal relationship skills by coaching team members to handle their own situations directly with others (rather than creating a relationship triangle and becoming the focal point in it). Occasionally as a last resort, it may become appropriate for a mediator to become involved when individuals are unable to come to resolution on their own; in this case, the leader should consider involving a neutral third party as a way to reinforce the notion that a leader is not responsible for resolving team members' interpersonal relationship problems.

A team should adopt an explicit set of agreements that govern behavior of the team and its members (Avery, 2001). Team operating agreements make explicit expectations amongst team members that are often implicit; this enables the team to understand what is desirable and to hold each other accountable when (not if) a team member breaks an agreement. It's useful to develop and write down team operating agreements when the team initially forms, and change them any time it becomes apparent that a new agreement has value.

In the case study situation as well as in any team, adoption of team agreements around how to make and receive proper requests, how to provide feedback responsibly, and how to responsibly deal with interpersonal relationship conflict can enable effective communication.

Improving the Productivity of Team Meetings

As a general principle, any team member should be prepared to facilitate a team meeting. Team meetings are where "teamness" and collaboration occur. When a meeting doesn't seem to be starting correctly, offering to act as a facilitator can significantly improve the effectiveness of meetings. A facilitator acts as a servant of the group, ensures there is a clear purpose for the meeting, elicits an agenda, and keeps the group on track to accomplish its objectives (Doyle and Straus, 1982).

Avery (2004) proposes these common situations that you should be prepared to deal with as a facilitator:

1. Solicit agreements about the meeting agenda (items, priorities, allotted time, sequence, desired outcome).
2. Call time agreements (“We have now spent 15 minutes on this item, and the team allocated 10. What do we want to do?”)
3. Deal with subgroup topic drift (when the conversation involves less than half the group and goes on for a long time, point it out ask the team what to do).
4. Move from polarity to problem solving (when arguments arise where individuals are promoting the merits of their viewpoint, acknowledge the viewpoints and ask the group how to move forward).
5. Seek clarity of communication (a participant is rambling and it’s not apparent where they’re going, ask what specifically it is they want from the group).
6. Invite the group to check in (when participation or energy seems low, point out your observation and ask the group how to fix it).
7. Change roles (when the discussion enters an area where you are passionate or can contribute value, inform the group that you are stepping out of your role as a facilitator).
8. Transition without losing attention (it seems that the group may be ready to move on, so ask a question to confirm that it is time to move on).

Creating and using shared visual displays or other kinds of *shared spaces* is effective within a group to deepen shared understanding, accelerate innovation, and speed group response time. Remember that conversation is inherently transient; it only lasts a very short time. The

collective memory of the group can be forgetful. Shared space improves team collaboration and team memory (Avery, 2004).

Every team member is responsible for managing their own time and attention. This means that it is their responsibility to participate in a meeting when they need to be there. If a team member is unable to attend, then it is their responsibility to acquire information they need by asking another team member to cover for them or by other appropriate means.

In today's busy world, no one can afford to spend time in a meeting that is not valuable. One effective approach is to give permission for any team member to leave a meeting where they have no appropriate contribution to make or receive no value for time spent.

As previously discussed, team operating agreements make explicit desirable team behavior, and a team can establish team operating agreements around all of these meeting matters.

Hitting Team Milestones

A critical success factor for any team is clarity of purpose; without it, teams struggle to find their way. Research into team effectiveness factors by Lowther and Marshall (1997) show that clarity of purpose is the second most important success factor. PCI Global (2004), a project management training company, surveyed project managers and project team members and found that: "Clarity of purpose is of paramount importance to project teams." Quast and Helsing (2000), in their TeamWise Success Model, identify clarity of purpose as the first factor for success and is the foundation upon which team development and performance is built.

Avery (2004) states that clarity leads to power and the ability of a team to move forward, and provides a test for shared clarity: What must we do together that is bigger than any of us, requires all of us, and none of us can claim individual victory until it's done? Figure 1 depicts a model for clarifying shared purpose (adapted from Avery, 2004).

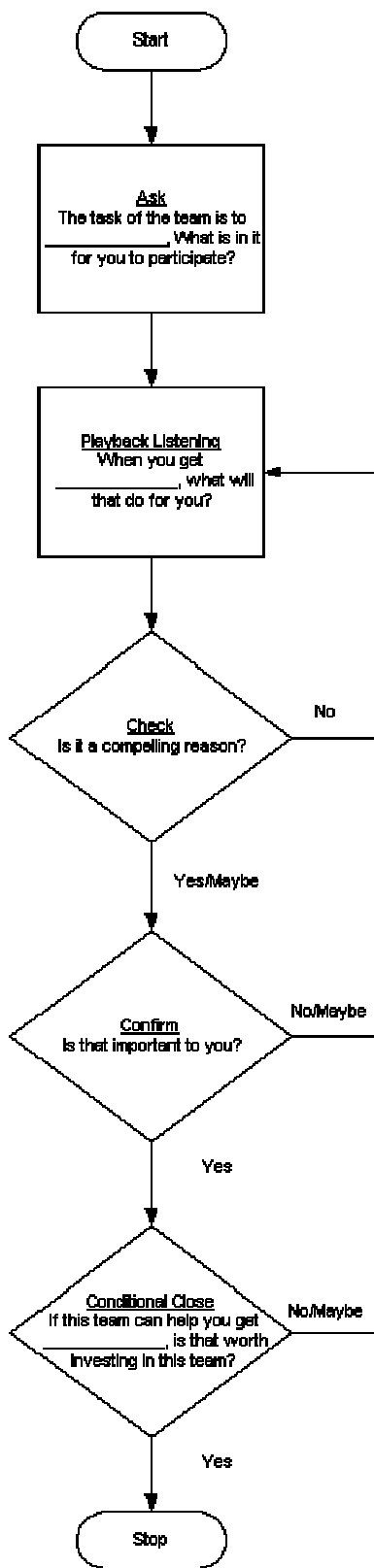


Figure 1 – Clarifying Shared Purpose

Building a time for self-reflection and team learning is important to develop a high performance team. A *team retrospective* is a means of assessing how the project team is doing by holding a special meeting at regular intervals for this purpose. By evaluating project progress, team performance, team processes, quality, team operating agreements, and any matter that comes to the mind of team members, the team can create new and useful distinctions, perspectives, and action plans (Gottesdiener, 2003). There are four key questions that form the basis of a retrospective (Retrospectives, n.d.):

- What did we do well, that if we don't discuss we might forget?
- What did we learn?
- What should we do differently next time?
- What still puzzles us?

Holding a retrospective at regular intervals that coincide with the cycles of the project also provides an opportunity to mark a milestone in time. Even a brief pause in team activity, such as separating the retrospective marking the end of a work cycle from the planning of the next work cycle can be meaningful. Such demarcations serve as an opportunity to celebrate the team's accomplishments, blow off a little steam, build relationships, recharge energy, and provide meaningful closure to a chapter of work.

VIII

CONCLUSION

The case study scenario and the discussion of its problems and potential solutions reflect that effective communication enables superior teamwork and are consistent with conversational and group communication theories. The case study suggests that high performing teams need to perform well with a combination of conversation skills, relationship skills, and team processes.

The answers to the case study questions suggest a variety of techniques that a team can use to improve its effectiveness, and they all related to communication:

- Consensus as a technique for team decision making
- Making proper requests and receiving proper responses
- Giving feedback responsibly
- Being responsibility for one's personal relationships
- Team operating agreements
- Meeting facilitation
- Shared spaces for improved collaboration
- Managing one's own time and attention
- Clarifying shared purpose
- Retrospectives
- Demarcation and celebration of milestones

Knowledge teams operate primarily through the shared meaning built by conversation between team members. Even when teams deliver results that incorporate advanced technologies, technical skill is not a significant determinant of success. Teams can achieve breakthroughs and become high performing only when communication within the team is at peak effectiveness.

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