Rope Dancing

Virtual teams and communication

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Teaming up with individuals from other cultures and time zones is not so uncommon anymore. What once used to be the sole predicate of adventurous businessmen, who were keen on discovering other cultures, is rapidly becoming the number one burden of a major part of middle management in multinational companies. How can you possibly team up through a wire with people you never actually met? 'Think global, act local' is merely digested by top management and here comes 'local meets local'!

Virtual teams gather through one or other wire enabling them to e-mail, call, chat, video-conference, telephone-conference, to have web-seminars etc. Each of these wires allows us to communicate in such a way that we can best reach our objectives. Mostly the objectives of virtual teams are quite challenging.

The regular wire

In order to really understand the difficulty of virtual communication we need to step back and have a look at the wire itself. If one would represent daily face-to-face communications by a cable, it would have 7 wires. Each of them is a channel transmitting a part of the communication and taken together, they ensure a flawless interpretation (meaning: the message sent equals the message received).

- First, there is the message text. This is the literal transcript of the message. Nothing more, nothing less. Typically the impact of this part of a communication is overestimated. During a presentation, the literal words only account for 7% of the impact![1]
- Second, the visual contact gives a first hint on how to interpret the message.
- Third, voice and articulation most of the times indicate the intensity of the message. This impacts people for about 38% of the communication, which is far more than the verbal part.
- Fourth, body language, which together with eye contact makes the visual part of a communication. This is a part that is systematically underestimated. The same research shows that it accounts for 55% of the impact of a communication.
- Fifth, the context of the sender and the receiver, or rather the gap in-between. Context is what determines cultural differences. It feeds our perception and through this, the choices we make and the actions we take.
- Sixth, the timing of sending and receiving, which does not refer to the difference in time-zones (this is a context factor), but to the urgency of the communication. Sometimes the sender and the receiver experience the urgency very different.
- Finally, the feedback wire ensures that the message received gets the same interpretation as the message sent.

[1] See Albert Mehrabian "Nonverbal Communication" Walter De Gruyter; 1972
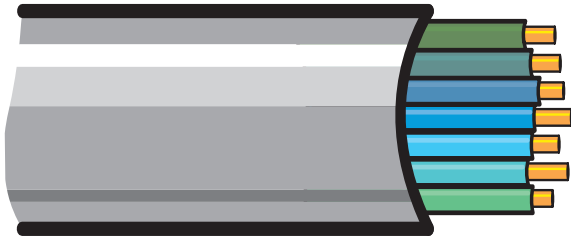
- Message Text
- Eye contact
- Voice level and articulation
- Body language
- Context in which the message is received
- Timing of message reception
- Feedback

• In face-to-face communication all the wires are in use, which is the best guarantee that the shipment will arrive in the right form;

• In telephone communications the wires for eye contact, body language and the context in which the message is received, are not used.

• Have you decided to communicate by e-mail? Then you place all your bets on that one wire, namely the 'message text'. The unused wires determine the possibilities for errors in your communications.

Of course we can cut out some wires and still receive what is being sent, but the chance of communication errors increases exponentially. Take for example the e-mail message from Tom to Peter, stating 'I agree'. Peter has all the right to think that Tom fully agrees with his point of view. However, in a face-to-face conversation Tom may say 'I agree' while rolling his eyeballs upwards, meaning 'you are right and I hate to admit it'. His voice may be silent, loud or even a sigh, meaning 'I give up'. Tom may be lifting his shoulders, nodding his head or even shaking his head, meaning 'This is ridiculous'. While Tom is still saying the exact same words 'I agree', the meaning has completely changed by his body language. Now imagine that Tom is Indonesian and Peter is from Denmark. To agree in each context may result in different actions and may have other consequences. To make things worse, Peter may be Toms' customer waiting for an urgent shipment of assembly pieces for a just-in-time production plant. One can imagine that Peter wants to use the feedback wire in order to ensure that what is being said in Toms e-mail is really what is being meant.

Rope dancing on the virtual wire

Communication breakdowns, conflicts and mis-understandings in virtual teams are for 99% due to the fact that the complete message is trans-ferred at once over one or two wires. We think we are saving time by pushing messages and hoping that they arrive as they were intended. In reality we are losing time, because the receiver may take the wrong conclusions and actions or may be confused or even upset. It often takes some time before we start to realise that we need to use to use the feedback wire. However, by the time we do, the damage done is often too big, so a new communication is necessary.

The best way to prevent this is by creating a redundancy through the use of other available wires.
For example:
- Summarise important phone calls per e-mail. Make a bullet list of the main conclusions and ask the receiver to confirm by replying to your e-mail.
- Use the feedback wire extensively during a virtual meeting by rephrasing and summa-rising.
- At the end of a virtual meeting, let the

participants state in their own words what actions are expected of them. Often the social pressure of a virtual meeting is so high that participants are scared to say they did not understand what is expected of them. Moreover, the interpretation of 'what is expected of me' is context related.

- Carefully prepare virtual meetings with the necessary texts and visuals.
- If you want to make sure that your e-mail is followed by the appropriate action of the receiver, it is better to ask for confirmation by telephone.

In short: the more wires are used to communicate, the more accurate the meaning of a message will be transmitted. Actively creating redundancy in virtual communication is a way to minimise the communication breakdowns.

Author

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