

MANAGING COMMUNICATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGH-STAKES PROJECTS

Shubhashree (Serena) S. Iyer and Ritu Gupta wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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By October 2024, Alex Harrison had been a dedicated employee at a leading US technology firm Gestrava Technology Corporation (Gestrava Tech) for over two years. When Harrison first joined the company, he was a driven and ambitious professional eager to prove his skills in data analysis and project management. In the beginning, his role was primarily technical. Over time, however, he was trusted with increasingly significant responsibilities (see Exhibit 1). Harrison helped to consistently drive his team forward with the quality of this work and an ability for synthesizing complex data into actionable insights, making him a key member of the project management team. Despite his contributions, however Harrison felt that his efforts were often unrecognized for career advancement by senior leadership decision-makers. In addition, the management style of his direct supervisor Chris Everett, which involved overseeing every step of the process, seemed to limit Harrison's ability to fully take ownership of his tasks.

Harrison felt that this tension between responsibility and recognition was a recurring theme in his experience at Gestrava Tech. The company culture placed high value on visibility and direct contribution to the senior leadership team, which were considered key factors for career advancement. However, despite doing much of the behind-the-scenes work, Harrison felt overlooked, especially with his supervisor Everett taking credit for much of the team's success. A specific incident that involved communicating performance goal data to the senior management team became a critical point in Harrison's frustration. He was forced to confront the delicate balance between fulfilling his role and maintaining his credibility, while navigating the chain of command.

BACKGROUND

Like many companies, Gestrava Tech operated in a highly competitive environment, where data-driven decision-making was a critical success factor. The company had recently introduced a quarterly review system that was designed to align departmental objectives more closely with corporate strategy (see Exhibit 2). This process was a central part of ensuring that all teams worked toward fulfilling the company's long-term goals. It required precise communication of key performance indicators to the senior management team (see Exhibit 3). Harrison's job involved compiling and consolidating metrics from various departments. The task demanded accuracy, timeliness, and clear communication. It was a critical role in the overall process of consolidating data from various departments for delivery to the senior management team through a structured system of reporting channels (see Exhibit 4).

Harrison was able to use his strong analytical skills to manage the communication of the data to senior leadership members. The stakes of his responsibility were high. The data that Harrison prepared and presented would inform some major strategic decisions for the company. Harrison's supervisor insisted on being copied on every email that Harrison sent to the senior management team. His rationale was that oversight was necessary to ensure consistency and avoid any miscommunication, but Harrison found the insistence on including Everett in all of his work frustrating. He felt that it limited his ability to demonstrate his independence and take full ownership of his accomplishments.

Despite these challenges, Harrison consistently delivered strong results, although he felt that his contributions were not being adequately recognized. All of his interactions with the senior management team were filtered and presented using Everett's discretion. Harrison's desire for greater autonomy was also shared by some of his peers. Other employees mentioned to Harrison that Everett's restrictive approach was stifling their professional growth and limiting opportunities to interact directly with the leadership team.

THE DILEMMA

On October 1, 2024, Harrison was assigned the important task of distributing revised performance goals after a high-level alignment meeting. After gathering input from several departments, he carefully synthesized the data and sent a comprehensive report to the senior management team. He ensured that the information was accurate and fully aligned with the latest discussions (see Exhibit 5). Harrison's email communication to the leadership team members was critical. The performance goals he had compiled and presented would be used to guide the company's strategy for the upcoming quarter.

However, shortly after Harrison sent his report by email, Everett reviewed it and identified an important omission (see Exhibit 6). During the meeting, a late-breaking change was added to the financial targets, but that information was not communicated to Harrison in time for him to include it in his report. The revised financial figures, based on the late addition, could have a critical impact on the decisions that the senior leadership team was preparing to make. Everett notified Harrison about the new information and asked him to send a correction to his report as soon as possible.

Harrison was frustrated and conflicted by the situation. The error had occurred after he prepared his report, but he was being asked to issue a correction that implied it was his error. Sending a corrected report to the senior management team would highlight the error and potentially damage his credibility, making him appear careless or incompetent. He also worried that he would be blamed for the oversight by the senior leadership team members, who were unaware that the figures had changed after Harrison prepared his report. Harrison also resented being put in this position by Everett, who preferred to use an overbearing management approach. If Harrison had been trusted and allowed greater autonomy and oversight, he could have been more deeply involved in the meeting's financial discussions, which would have provided him with all necessary information and prevented an inaccurate report for being sent to the leadership team.

Harrison also worried about the political implications of sending a correction. He could send an email directly to the senior management team without consulting Everett to explain how the new information was provided, but he would be seen as purposely bypassing and blaming his supervisor. Alternatively, he could take the time to consult with Everett about making the correction to the report, but that could delay the process and cause other potential issues. Harrison was torn between protecting his own professional reputation and maintaining the chain of command within his department.

Harrison realized that this situation was emblematic of the larger issue he had been grappling with since joining Gestrava Tech. He needed more recognition and the freedom to take ownership of his work (see Exhibit 7). However, the stakes of this particular situation were high and could impact his relationship with

both his supervisor and the senior leadership team members. The error in the report had to be corrected as soon as possible, but he was determined to maintain his credibility and demonstrate his ability to professionally manage high-pressure situations.

Harrison had to make a decision on the best way to remedy the situation. He could send an email directly to the senior management team (without copying Everett) to explain how the error came about and to provide the corrected figures. Alternatively, he could meet with Everett to consult about preparing a corrected report together, which could avoid a potential conflict with his supervisor. The dilemma Harrison was experiencing illustrated the issues of the company's communication policies and the balance between oversight and autonomy (see Exhibit 8). Harrison wondered if this was a key opportunity to open a larger conversation about the need for clearer communication channels and more trust between managers and their team members at Gestrava Tech.

Harrison realized that this situation encapsulated the challenges that many employees in many companies faced in a fast-paced corporate environment, where accountability and communication were paramount (see Exhibit 3). The resolution of this issue was likely to influence Harrison's future at Gestrava Tech and become an example of how to manage such situations at the company.

DECISION POINT: COMMUNICATING THE CORRECTION WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

Harrison had to communicate the revised financial targets to the senior management team with professionalism, accountability, and strategic thinking. Ideally, he would be able to correct the error in the report, maintain his credibility with the senior leadership team, and preserve a positive working relationship with his supervisor. Successful and efficient management of this situation would heighten the perception of his professionalism and accountability, as well as influencing his career development at Gestrava Tech. Harrison considered three different potential approaches.

The first option was to communicate directly with the senior management team, without consulting Everett. He would explain how the error was made, provide the corrected figures, and outline the various steps that should be taken to prevent similar errors from occurring in the future. This approach would demonstrate ownership, proactiveness, and a commitment to accuracy. However, acting independently without consulting his supervisor could create friction with Everett, who might perceive it as an attempt to bypass his authority. The working relationship of the two colleagues could be strained.

Alternatively, Harrison could consult Everett to prepare a corrected report and explain the urgency of the situation, while seeking only his approval to proceed with his communication with the senior management team. This would follow the established chain of command and prevent friction from Everett. However, Harrison would have to ensure that he could work independently to prevent unnecessary delays and retain confidence from the senior management team in his ability to manage critical communications effectively.

A third approach was to manage the correction of the report as a collaborative effort with Everett. Harrison could manage the delivery and presentation of the corrected report, while confirming the importance of transparency and teamwork with his colleagues. By collaborating on the correction and ensuring that his supervisor was included in the communication, Harrison could reinforce his credibility and maintain trust with both his immediate supervisor and the senior leadership team.

Each of these choices had potential risks and rewards. Harrison had to make a decision that balanced accountability, professionalism, and relationship management. His chosen approach would affect how senior management viewed his ability to handle high-stakes communication. It would also influence his long-term career trajectory with Gestrava Tech.

EXHIBIT 1: MAJOR MILESTONES OF THE ORGANIZATION (IN CAREER PROGRESSION)

Type of Roles	Typical Designations	Development Milestones
Entry-Level Roles	Analyst, associate, trainee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-year tenure with a mentorship program Comprehensive onboarding training focused on industry and company operations
Mid-Level Career Growth	Manager, senior associate, specialist, lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion path: Three to five years to reach a mid-level role First leadership training programs for team management Involvement in cross-functional projects and strategic decision-making
Leadership Positions	Senior manager, director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotions based on leadership skills and department impact Leading high-stakes, cross-departmental initiatives Opportunities to oversee international projects or initiatives
Executive Level	Vice-president, senior vice-president, executive officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 10 years of tenure, or accelerated progression for high performers Executive coaching and leadership programs Major involvement in setting long-term company strategy and vision
Special Programs and Opportunities	Leadership Development Programs: Available after five years of service or upon promotion to senior management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rotations in global offices after seven years, creating a path to global leadership roles

Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 2: TIMELINE OF EVENTS

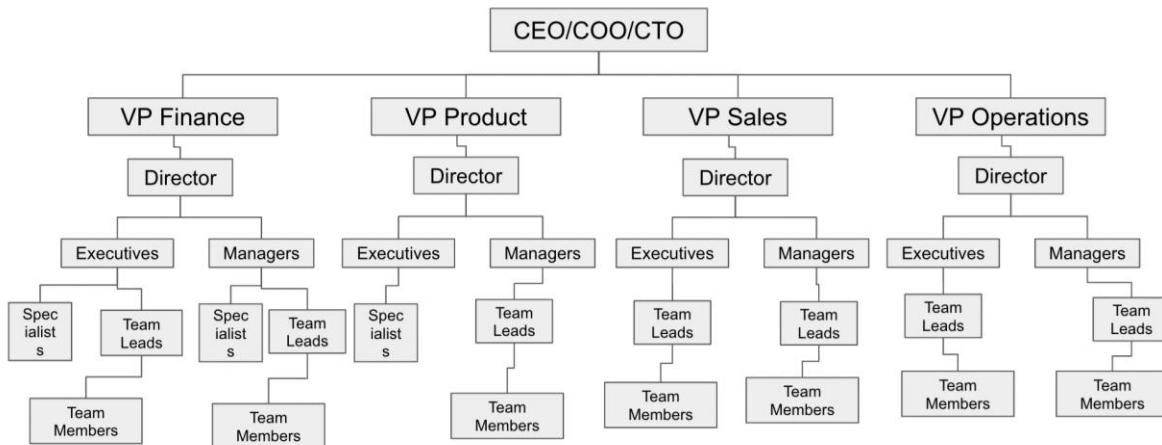
Date	Event
October 1, 2024	Alignment meeting held to set quarterly performance targets
October 5, 2024	Alex Harrison asked to send initial performance goals report to senior management team
October 5, 2024	Request for revision from Chris Everett due to a late change in targets
October 5, 2024	Corrected report to senior management team

Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 3: SUMMARY OF KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (INITIAL AND REVISED TARGETS)

Metric	Initial Target	Revised Target	Difference
Revenue Growth	8%	6%	-2%
Market Share	5%	5.5%	+0.5%
Customer Retention	92%	90%	-2%
Cost Reduction Goals	4%	3.5%	-0.5%

Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 4: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF GESTRAVA TECHNOLOGY CORPORATION

Note: CEO = chief executive officer; COO = chief operating officer; CTO = chief technology officer; VP = vice-president.
 Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 5: ORIGINAL EMAIL SENT TO SENIOR MANAGEMENT

From: Alex Harrison
To: Senior Management
CC: Chris Everett (Manager)
Date: October 5, 2024

Subject: Quarterly Performance Goals Alignment—Final Data

Dear Senior Management Team,

Please find attached the final data for our department's quarterly performance goals, as discussed in the alignment meeting. The attached document outlines our targets for the next quarter based on input from key departments, including sales, marketing, and product development.

We have consolidated the data to reflect the latest KPIs, and we believe this will provide clarity for the strategic planning process.

Best regards,

Alex Harrison
Project Manager, Gestrava Technology Corporation

Attachment: Quarterly_Performance_Goals.pdf

Note: KPI = key performance indicator.
Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 6: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL FROM CHRIS EVERETT TO ALEX HARRISON

From: Chris Everett
To: Alex Harrison
Date: October 5, 2024

Subject: Urgent—Data Revision Needed

Hi Alex,

I just realized that the financial targets we discussed in the meeting have changed after a brief follow-up with the finance team. We missed the updated numbers during the initial conversation. I need you to correct the report you just sent and send the revised version to senior management ASAP.

Let me know if you need any clarification.

Best,
Chris
Manager, Project Operations

Note: ASAP = as soon as possible.
Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 7: KEY CAREER DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AND ORGANIZATIONAL MILESTONES AT GESTRAVA TECHNOLOGY CORPORATION

Year	Milestone	Description
2015	Entry-Level Recruitment Program Launched	Initiated entry-level recruitment program to attract fresh graduates, focusing on providing structured career paths in technology
2017	Leadership Development Program Introduced	Launched an internal training program aimed at high-performing employees to fast-track them into management roles within three to five years
2018	Mid-Level Promotions Restructured	Introduced a more flexible promotion cycle for mid-level employees, allowing biannual reviews instead of the annual system used earlier
2020	Cross-Department Career Pathway	Rolled out a new initiative allowing employees to switch departments (e.g., from finance to operations) as part of career growth opportunities
2021	Senior Executive Development Program	Focused on developing senior-level executives by offering mentorship from top leadership and creating individualized career development plans
2023	Global Leadership Exchange Program	Enabled senior employees to take on international assignments and leadership roles in new markets, aiming to create a global leadership pipeline
2024	Hybrid Career Growth Tracks	Introduced hybrid career tracks combining technical skills with leadership training to better prepare employees for upper management positions

Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 8: ORGANIZATIONAL CHART FOR COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

Level	Position
Senior Management Team	Chief executive officer; chief operating officer; chief technology officer
Middle Management Team	Chris Everett (manager)
Project Team	Alex Harrison (team lead)

Source: Created by the case authors based on company documents.