Leading Teams: Fostering Effective Communication and Collaboration

Course Overview

Read the Course Overview .

How Healthy Teams Communicate

Course Overview

Everyone on your team is committed to the team's goals, but how will they achieve them? Do they choose to work separately to avoid the hassle of working together? Do they communicate freely and honestly with each other and with you as team lead? If so, what's the nature of the communication? Is it positive, encouraging, and honest? Or is it sarcastic, critical, and guarded?

High-performance teams rely on both healthy communication and a spirit of collaboration. Three main situations arise for communicating on a team, and these often take place in team meetings: sharing information with someone, receiving information that someone shares with you, and responding to what someone tells you.

How you give, receive, and respond to information largely determines how well your team members work together.

For example, you may need to inform someone of the deadline for a task, or give direction on how to solve a problem. Or a team member may need to let you know she needs help understanding a procedure or that she's having an interpersonal conflict with a teammate.

Even when communication on a team is healthy – when team members are sending and receiving information well – there may be a lack of collaboration.

Team members must be able to work together for a team to reach its maximum potential. If they can't, they're not so much a team as they're a collection of people working in the same direction.

Improving the way your team members talk to each other and work with each other – team communication and collaboration – leads to several benefits:

- team members feel more involved, so you get greater buy-in from members on team decisions and objectives
- collaborative teams with good communication skills enjoy higher productivity than noncollaborative teams
- when it comes to creativity and problem solving, two heads are truly better than one, especially when coupled with effective communication, and
- when team members collaborate, they take greater ownership and feel a sense of purpose, which results in a high level of job satisfaction

In this course, you'll learn more about the importance and benefits of promoting healthy team communication and collaboration. You'll learn techniques for encouraging effective communication so that every member contributes and your team reaches its full potential.

Because many important team activities take place during team meetings, you'll learn specific strategies to address dysfunctional communication behaviors in meeting situations. These strategies will allow you to turn your team environment into a safe, dependable place where creativity and problem solving flourish in a positive atmosphere.

You'll also learn strategies team leaders can use to encourage team collaboration. These include fostering shared ownership and stressing a team orientation through communication and work assignments.

Qualities of Good Team Communication

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *match characteristics of healthy team communication with examples*

1. Importance of good communication

At the Johnson house, things were going along smoothly until Mrs. Johnson started working nights and Mr. Johnson needed to travel more for his job. The Johnson's teenage daughter has soccer practice three times a week after school, and their son takes piano lessons and plays two different sports.

The family still gets along fairly well in person whenever their schedules coincide, but they just don't communicate as well as they used to.

Hurried phone calls, passing comments, and cryptic notes stuck to the refrigerator have taken the place of real conversation. As a result, things have started falling apart around the house. Opportunities are being missed, conflicts keep popping up, and more and more time and effort are needed to fix mistakes and soothe hurt feelings.

Reflect

Like families, teams require healthy communication to function at their best. Have you ever been on a team where communication was less than healthy? How did it affect performance?

Enter your thoughts in the space provided. Then select the Next Page button to continue.

Write down your response or enter it in a text file in your word-processor application (or in a text editor such as Notepad) and save it to your hard drive for later viewing.

---

2. Characteristics of healthy communication

Healthy communication is what keeps your team performing at its best. Unhealthy communication leads to misunderstandings and mistakes. It can also mean that some members fail to contribute.

To ensure your team communicates effectively, you may need to establish healthy communication as a team value and set some ground rules for team communication.

And, as a team leader, you must lead by example by ensuring your own communications reflect the best characteristics.

To develop guidelines and get your team to communicate effectively, you need to recognize the characteristics of healthy team communication:

- Your communications should be direct, honest, and concise. Describe the action you want taken and give the person all the specific information necessary – including the who, what, when, where, and how of the situation.
- Team communication must be clear, understandable, and precise. Avoid using jargon, slang, abbreviations, or acronyms that aren't immediately recognizable to everyone on the team.
- Healthy communication is a two-way street. On healthy teams, the team leader and team members exchange information and feel free to give each other positive and negative

feedback.

- When communication is healthy, teammates show they value one another's opinions, comments, and suggestions. Healthy communication makes team members feel comfortable and safe, encouraging everyone to participate.
- A good communication environment means information is constantly being exchanged. By keeping the lines of communication open and flowing, information is shared in a timely fashion, mistakes are caught early, and potential conflicts can be avoided.

Select each characteristic for more information.

Direct and honest

Don't say, "It would be really great if you could find time to catch up on the filing sometime." Instead say, "Please bring the files up to date by Tuesday."

Clear and understandable

Statements like "To get up to speed in time for the rollout, we're going to have to drink from the fire hose, but I guess that's just BAU" are colorful, but they slow things down and cause confusion.

Two-way

To encourage two-way communication, you need to ensure team members feel comfortable. Tell your team members "I'm always available to you" and "I want to hear what you have to say." Say "Thanks for the feedback" and "I really appreciate you letting me know about your concerns."

Encouraging

Don't say things like "You can't really think that" or "I just don't understand how you can feel that way." You need to encourage your team members to speak up, rather than put them down for doing so. Some people are naturally shy, others think what they have to say isn't important, and still others may feel pressured not to speak up if they disagree. Let these people know the team needs their input.

Constant

When you or one of your teammates notices something that might be detrimental to team success, it's important to speak up. If another team member is doing something she shouldn't, it can't wait until the next weekly meeting; it needs to be addressed immediately. Only a constant flow of information can keep a team performing at its best.

Jake is the leader on a team formed to explore the possibility of instituting a just-in-time inventory system at the manufacturing plant where he works. The team will soon be making its vital first presentation to senior management. Jake knows every member of his team will need to contribute to the fullest if they're going to be successful.

Follow along as Jake and his team discuss the upcoming presentation.

```
Jake: OK. Any comments before we begin going over the plan for
the presentation?

Andrea: Let's just get started.

Tony: Wait a minute. I've got a question. How soon would the
implementation take place?

Jake: Management wants a quick return on investment for this
```

initiative, so we have to move fast. How about six weeks?

Andrea: Sure, that sounds good.

Jake: Kim and Sam, we haven't heard from you yet. Anything you care to add?

Kim: No, I don't think so.

Sam: Well, I just don't like the time frame we're talking about. People are set in their ways, and if we ask them to make the change in six weeks, I don't think they'll be ready for that.

Andrea: Sam, that's just silly. You can't really think people are that slow. You need to get out and talk to your coworkers more.
Andrea is abusive.

Jake: Wait a minute, Andrea. Sam is just as experienced in these types of rollouts as you and I. If he's got his doubts, that's important. Kim, do you agree?

Kim: Well, yes I do. I thought I was the only one who thought six weeks was too soon, so I was a little hesitant to speak up.

Jake: Well, please don't hesitate. We really need this kind of input. If anybody has any doubts, it might be better to allow for a little more time.

Andrea: Definitely! Sorry, I thought we were all on the same page.
Andrea is apologetic.

Jake: Good. Then let's start reviewing the presentation. Remember, I'm always in my office and available after each meeting if anyone needs me.

Jake made sure to get input from all his team members. When Andrea was dominating the discussion, he successfully drew out the two silent members and got their input.

After the meeting, Jake met with Tony to discuss some scheduling issues that had recently come up.

After working out the scheduling conflict, Jake decided to take the opportunity to get feedback from Tony. Follow along to learn what Tony contributed.

Jake: Tony, while we've got a moment to ourselves, what do you think of the way I handled the situation with Andrea and Sam?

Tony: I think you did well to jump in and support Sam.

Jake: Thanks.

> **Tony:** You might have gone a little further and mentioned to Andrea that the team communication manifesto we created early on says "Thou shalt not abuse thy teammates."
>
> **Jake:** You're right. Thanks for the feedback. I'll remember that next time things get out of hand.

Jake did a good job of encouraging healthy team communication. During the team meeting, he was honest and direct about management's needs. And he clearly explained – without using jargon or acronyms – that it's a quick return on investment that management wants.

When Andrea used language that put down her teammate's opinion, Jake quickly stepped in, encouraging Kim and Sam to contribute and letting them know their opinions were valued.

After the team meeting, Jake solicited feedback from Tony on the team's communications. By making himself constantly available and accepting the feedback positively, Jake ensured communication would remain a constant, two-way process.

Supplement

Selecting the link title opens the resource in a new browser window.

Job Aid

Access the job aid Recognizing Healthy Team Communication for a tool to use when trying to encourage healthy communication on your team.

Question

Match characteristics of healthy team communication with examples of how team leaders can model them.

Options:

   A. Direct and understandable

   B. Constant

   C. Encouraging

   D. Two-way

Targets:

   1. "I need you to complete the return on investment report, and ensure it's error free, by this Friday at 2 p.m."

2. The team leader communicates with his team members many times throughout the day, especially with the ones who work remotely.

3. "Kathy, you've been quiet during the entire meeting. I'd like to hear what you think of this whole thing."

4. "I'm available for two hours after each meeting in case anyone has questions or wants to discuss anything. And here's my cell number."

Answer

Direct and understandable messages are concise and clearly express specific requirements such as "error free" and "2 p.m." It's also best to avoid acronyms such as ROI for "return on investment."

Keeping the flow of information constant means the team will notice mistakes early on and important ideas won't be lost.

Letting team members know you value their opinion helps encourage all team members to participate, which helps your team reach its potential.

Making yourself available to your team members helps keep communication a two-way street. You should give and receive feedback freely.

Correct answer(s):

Target 1 = Option A

Target 2 = Option B

Target 3 = Option C

Target 4 = Option D

3. Summary

Healthy team communication occurs when team members feel safe about offering their opinions and ideas and giving and receiving feedback freely in a positive way. No team can reach its full potential without contributions from every single member.

To maximize team communications, you need to lead by example by making your messages clear, direct, and honest. To get the most out of your team, you must value and encourage constant, two-way communication.

Handling Communication Problems in Team Meetings

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *apply strategies to improve communication during a given team meeting*

1. Team communication problems

Your team gets along great, and all team members are highly skilled and industrious. But team meetings are driven by one or two highly vocal people who go on and on after making their point, rephrasing and repeating it. Every meeting runs over, and there's rarely time to hear from the quieter members, even if you could get them talking. But meetings are a small part of what you do, right?

Wrong. In fact, teams perform many of their basic functions in meetings. Meetings are when teams solve problems, generate ideas, and make important decisions.

And for teams to reach their potential, all team members must contribute in meetings and out of them. If someone's input wasn't needed, she wouldn't be on the team. As team leader, your job is to ensure that communication is balanced and each team member gets a chance to contribute.

Two types of team members can cause communication problems: members who are too dominant and members who are too withdrawn.

Select each broad category of team communication problems – starting with the "Dominant" group – for more information.

Dominant members

Dominant members drive the group in the direction they want, and others tend to tag along whether they agree or not.

Withdrawn members

On the other side of the spectrum, withdrawn members rarely contribute, remain quietly in the background, and never disagree with the group direction.

2. Handling overcriticism and groupthink

These two main communication problems result in two sets of dysfunctional team behaviors. The first set ranges from overcriticism to groupthink, and the second from interrupters to noncontributors.

Select each type of problem for more information.

Overcriticism

Overcriticism happens when certain team members are hypercritical of ideas, other people, or the decision-making process itself. Some amount of criticism is valuable for challenging new ideas and helping improve them. But overcriticism tends to have the opposite effect. It shuts down ideas before they have a chance.

Groupthink

Groupthink is a communication problem that, oddly enough, arises when teams are doing well. High-performing teams may gather such momentum that every idea seems like a good one, and members wouldn't dream of disrupting the camaraderie by criticizing or questioning their teammates' ideas.

Interrupters

Interrupters dominate the discussion. They don't want to listen to anyone else. They want to hear themselves speak and promote their own opinions.

Noncontributors

Team members may be noncontributors for a number of different reasons. They may feel that their opinions are less valid because they're new to the team or they lack experience. Noncontributors may fear repercussions for going against the opinions of other more dominant team members.

Overcriticism lies on the dominant side of the spectrum. One or two people on the team may tend to seize control of the discussion by overcriticizing all new ideas. When your team is trying to brainstorm, problem solve, or reach decisions, overly critical members can keep the team from making progress.

Juan, a team leader, is meeting with his team to brainstorm solutions to a problem. Follow along to learn how one person's tendency to overcriticize can affect team progress.

```
Juan: How can we deal with the fact that we're three weeks
behind schedule on submitting the new proposal?

Gina: I was thinking maybe it's time to bring in a couple of
contractors to help.

Rose: There's no way contract workers can get up to speed in
time to help us. It would also put us over budget and make us
look bad.

Gina: Well, not necessarily. We could use them short term for
the easier stuff. That would be affordable.

Rose: You always want to bring in contractors every time we
have a problem. Don't you have any new suggestions that don't
involve going outside the team?

Juan: Now wait a minute, Rose. Let's not dismiss Gina's idea
before at least considering it. And let's not make this
personal. Everyone's opinion is valuable, and Gina does have
some experience with this.
```

Rose wasn't only being overcritical of Gina's proposal, she was also attacking the person behind the ideas. Juan employed one of the most effective strategies to deal with overcriticism – he immediately said something to regain control of the meeting.

Another strategy Juan might have used was asking Rose what her suggestion or solution might be. If Rose didn't have a better idea, this would point out that she's focused on simply putting down other people's ideas.

To strategically get the team back on track, Juan should point out that what the team needs is solutions, not criticism.

Question

Which are examples of techniques for handling overcriticism in a team meeting?

Options:

1. "OK, Arlene, we've heard what you think is wrong with Miguel's idea, what would you suggest instead?"
2. "So, if I'm understanding you correctly, your point is that none of these solutions are correct."
3. "Let's get back on track. The point is to contribute to a solution, not prove other people wrong."
4. "As team lead, I knew I had to refuse to acknowledge Luther as he kept rolling his eyes whenever Keisha made a suggestion."

Answer

Option 1: This is a correct option. By politely turning the tables on the person who's being overly critical, you can often stop the behavior.

Option 2: This is an incorrect option. Rephrasing and clarifying a person's criticisms isn't a technique for handling this type of communication problem.

Option 3: This is a correct option. You should immediately say or do something to re-establish control of the meeting and turn the dialog toward seeking solutions.

Option 4: This is an incorrect option. As team leader, you should quickly step in and address this kind of overly critical nonverbal behavior instead of ignoring it.

Correct answer(s):

1. "OK, Arlene, we've heard what you think is wrong with Miguel's idea, what would you suggest instead?"
3. "Let's get back on track. The point is to contribute to a solution, not prove other people wrong."

Perhaps your team has the opposite problem to overcriticism. Do your team members rarely criticize one another? Does the team come up with a single answer to every problem as opposed to discussing and developing multiple options? If so, your team may have a case of groupthink.

When a team is in groupthink, neither critical thinking nor the free exchange of ideas occurs. Hesitant team members who might offer their thoughts if asked directly, or if someone else spoke up first, remain silent. In groupthink, nobody wants to rock the boat because they have too much faith in the team's abilities and eventual success. Groupthink prevents a team from benefiting from the input of all team members.

Juan and his team have moved past the proposal stage of their presentation. After Juan applied the appropriate strategies, overly critical members are no longer a problem. The team is now performing well, and everyone is on the same page. Follow along to find out how the group's decision making has changed.

Juan: So do we agree that the rollout will start with a presentation at the annual corporate meeting?

Gina: Sure. I think we're all in favor of that.

Rose: Yes. It seems like the best idea.

Juan: And Gina will make the presentation?

Rose: No reason not to have her do it. She'll be great!

Gina: Thanks. I'll be glad to. We'll want an intranet simulcast right?

Juan: Yes. Absolutely!

Rose: Sure! The simulcast didn't work so well last time, but I'm sure it was just the subject matter.

Gina: Right. This time we'll have a better response.

Juan's team now exhibits all the symptoms of groupthink. The team comes up with a single solution and moves forward with it without any critical examination.

The team's conversational tone carries the overall assumption of agreement, rather than setting the stage for a free exchange of ideas.

The previous failure of the intranet simulcast is justified as the result of outside influences, rather than the team's poor decision making.

The strategies for countering groupthink work toward breaking up unified, noncritical team thinking:

- Even if doing so requires taking a position you don't personally hold, play devil's advocate and poke as many holes in the prevailing idea as possible. By challenging the group's opinion, even if you agree with it, you may be able to encourage some critical thinking.
- Divide the group into subgroups and encourage them to critique each other's ideas. By breaking up the existing social patterns and power structure within the team, group members may be freed from the need to follow along in lockstep.
- How many times have you said, "I wish I'd thought to say that at the time?" If you give meeting participants time to think through ideas on their own, you may prevent groupthink. Distributing meeting agendas and materials in advance will give team members time to think without the influence of the rest of the team.

Juan recognizes the symptoms of groupthink. He tells his team "We should be sure about the intranet simulcast before proceeding. Let's take home the research we have on its effectiveness and then meet again Thursday to discuss the pros and cons."

Question

Which are examples of the techniques for handling issues related to groupthink?

Options:

1. The team lead separates the team into two smaller workgroups and tells them to research and develop a proposal for each of the two different options

2. The team lead takes the polar opposite position to the rest of the team, making an argument against the obvious choice

3. The team lead sends out the meeting agenda and associated research materials one week prior to the meeting

4. The team lead interrupts team members each time they start to agree too readily

5. The team lead reminds everyone of the ground rule that each team member is required to speak on every issue

Answer

Option 1: *This is a correct option. When the team members are in groupthink, you can divide the team up and ask each group to assume different viewpoints.*

Option 2: *This is a correct option. Playing devil's advocate is an appropriate way to try to get a team in groupthink to be more critical of the prevailing ideas.*

Option 3: *This is a correct option. Providing materials in advance may get people thinking and prevent automatic agreement with the general consensus.*

Option 4: *This is an incorrect option. Trying to stop people from saying they agree won't change the unified nature of a team in groupthink.*

Option 5: *This is an incorrect option. When a team is in groupthink, everyone will simply state their agreement. You won't get more critical thinking.*

Correct answer(s):

1. The team lead separates the team into two smaller workgroups and tells them to research and develop a proposal for each of the two different options
2. The team lead takes the polar opposite position to the rest of the team, making an argument against the obvious choice
3. The team lead sends out the meeting agenda and associated research materials one week prior to the meeting

3. Correcting imbalances in participation

The second set of dysfunctional behaviors – interrupters and noncontributors – reflects imbalances in participation on opposite ends of the communication spectrum. To address these behaviors, you must first moderate the interrupters and the people who tend to overcontribute. Then, you can create a safe environment for the noncontributors to join in the team discussion.

The dynamic has changed on Juan's team over time. A couple of new members, Victor and Kahlil, were added. One of the senior, more experienced team members, Gina, seems to dominate all team meetings. Follow along to learn how the team currently interacts.

```
Juan: Let's hear from everyone about ideas for the second stage
of the rollout.
```

> **Rose:** Well, I'd like to see us split into two groups and work
> on different stages of...
>
> **Gina:** Actually, Rose, we tried the two-group method last time
> and it didn't work that well. If we each take responsibility
> for one milestone, that'll be more efficient. That method has
> delivered better results.
>
> **Juan:** I'm not sure that'll work in this case. The situation has
> changed and...
>
> **Gina :** Oh, I know. You're going to say that we have more
> experience this time, so we can avoid the same mistakes. That's
> true, but assigning individual responsibilities will be safer.

You can employ two particular strategies when dealing with interrupters or other overtalkers.

You can set rules of order. For example, you can make it clear that questions should be held until the end, and that only one person is to talk at a time. You may need to remind members of these ground rules periodically.

Another option is to interrupt the interrupter and give the floor back to the person who was cut off. Ensure the original speaker completes what she was saying before allowing the conversation to resume.

Follow along as Juan uses both of the strategies for dealing with interrupters and overtalkers.

> **Rose:** Juan is better at kickoff meetings so maybe he should...
>
> **Gina:** That wouldn't work. He's going to be working off-site at
> the time. It would probably be best if you handled the kickoff
> meeting, Rose. You'll be great at it and...
>
> **Juan:** Hold on, Gina. That's the third time you've cut someone
> off. As you'll recall, our meeting ground rules say we should
> always let everyone be heard and to not interrupt.
>
> **Gina:** Sorry. You're right. Go ahead, Rose.
>
> **Rose:** Thanks. I wasn't going to say Juan should conduct the
> kickoff. I was going to say he's better at kickoff meetings so
> maybe he should coach whoever is going to be available to do
> this one.

Reflect

How do you think Juan did? Did he successfully change the course of the meeting?

Enter your thoughts about Juan's techniques in the space provided, and then select the Compare button for more information.

Write down your response or enter it in a text file in your word-processor application (or in a text editor such as Notepad) and save it to your hard drive for later viewing and for comparison with the alternate opinion that follows.

Juan's strategies

Juan did do well. Juan interrupted the interrupter and reminded Gina of the ground rules that were already in place. As it turned out, Gina didn't know what Rose was going to say, and Rose's input would have been lost if Gina had gone unchecked.

Interrupting can also be effective with long-winded people. Cut into what they're saying and invite others to speak, especially those who have yet to contribute.

Begin by drawing out the team members who have something they want to say. But how do you know who to target?

Is someone silent instead of enthusiastically supporting the team's current course? Does anyone seem agitated? Nonverbal cues such as body language or tone may indicate frustration or anger. Watch for signs that a team member wants to speak, and then cut into the discussion and give that person the floor.

Juan has used various strategies to help provide his team with a safe environment in which everyone can participate. He's still left with a couple of team members, Victor and Kahlil, who haven't contributed to the discussion. Follow along to learn how he draws them out.

```
Juan: Victor, we haven't heard from you at all regarding the
second stage of the rollout. I noticed you seemed uncomfortable
when the kickoff meeting was discussed. Is there anything you'd
like to add?

Victor: Well, as a new member of the team, I feel you all have
more experience with this than I do, but it seems to me that as
team lead, you should be present for the kickoff meeting.

Gina: Victor is right. You're the one everyone will be
expecting. But what can we do about that?

Victor: If the kickoff were pushed back one week, Juan would be
able to do it. Is there any reason we can't delay for a week?

Juan: Not really.

Rose: I can't think of any reason why we can't.

Juan: How about you, Kahlil? Do you have any input or any
issues to bring up?

Kahlil: No issues, really. And I agree with Victor about
delaying.

Rose: Then we're all in agreement. Juan will conduct the
kickoff one week later. That'll be much better!
```

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You're the team leader of an interdepartmental safety team at an auto manufacturer. Your team is exhibiting some dysfunctional behaviors in meetings.

Answer the questions in order.

Question

During your weekly team meeting, Skip, your most senior team member, keeps interrupting others and dominating the discussion. What should you say to moderate the behavior?

Options:

1. "Remember, we all agreed when we formed the team that we would respect each other and never interrupt."
2. "Skip, I'm sorry to interrupt you but we need to hear from some of the other team members too."
3. "The meeting will run long today so that everyone can have their say."
4. "Skip, why don't you help moderate the discussion? If you sit this one out, everyone else will get their say."

Answer

Option 1: This is a correct option. From time to time, you may have to remind team members of the ground rules you've previously established.

Option 2: This is a correct option. Interrupting the interrupter is a useful strategy for allowing others to speak.

Option 3: This is an incorrect option. Not putting limits on the discussion won't change the team dynamic. Dominant members will still edge others out.

Option 4: This is an incorrect option. Totally shutting down a valuable team member doesn't create a safe environment. Skip's behavior needs moderation.

Correct answer(s):

1. "Remember, we all agreed when we formed the team that we would respect each other and never interrupt."
2. "Skip, I'm sorry to interrupt you but we need to hear from some of the other team members too."

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You're the team leader of an interdepartmental safety team at an auto manufacturer. Your team is exhibiting some dysfunctional behaviors in meetings.

Answer the questions in order.

Question

Three team members – Rashid, Marsha, and Donna – haven't said anything. Of the three, you've noticed that Marsha seems the most uncomfortable. She's often silent and looks away from the group.

Which strategies would you employ to get Marsha to join in?

Options:

1. "Marsha, I've noticed you seem to go quiet when everyone else is enthusiastic about the campaign. How do you feel about it?"

2. "Skip, could you explain the advertising campaign again so everyone will be clear about it?"

3. "Marsha, what's your opinion of the standards we've developed?"

4. "Marsha, I know you have something to say, but first, let's get Rashid and Donna involved here."

Answer

Option 1: *This is a correct option. Watching for nonverbal indicators of Marsha's discomfort and then bringing her into the discussion is a good strategy.*

Option 2: *This is an incorrect option. Skip has had the floor for much of the meeting. He doesn't need encouragement to talk and clarity isn't the issue.*

Option 3: *This is a correct option. Once the environment is "safe," asking Marsha directly for her input is an appropriate strategy.*

Option 4: *This is an incorrect option. As team leader, you should first draw out Marsha before tackling those members who show no sign of wanting to speak.*

Correct answer(s):

1. "Marsha, I've noticed you seem to go quiet when everyone else is enthusiastic about the campaign. How do you feel about it?"
3. "Marsha, what's your opinion of the standards we've developed?"

4. Improving communication

To correct communication problems during meetings, you first need to be able to recognize the signs of the dysfunctional behaviors and then choose the strategies that are most appropriate.

Supplement

Selecting the link title opens the resource in a new browser window.

Job Aid

Access the job aid Strategies for Handling Communication Problems for a useful reminder of the behaviors and strategies that apply.

Case Study: Question 1 of 2

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You're the leader of the events committee at the local community college. Your group is experiencing communication problems during meetings, and not all members are contributing to their fullest.

Access the learning aid Events Committee Meeting to review the planning discussion from several meetings ago.

Answer the questions in order.

Question

Which communication problem is this team having?

Options:

1. Groupthink

2. Overcriticizing

3. Interrupters

4. Noncontributors

Answer

Option 1: This is the correct option. The events committee seems to agree on everything, and rarely explores other options or seeks outside recommendations, even though last year's event had problems.

Option 2: This is an incorrect option. The events committee members suffer from undercriticism, not overcriticism. The team is in a state of groupthink.

Option 3: This is an incorrect option. Nobody interrupts on this team as there's no need. They're of one group mind.

Option 4: This is an incorrect option. Jackie is the closest this team comes to having a noncontributor. But although she suppresses her own input, she joins in and goes with the flow. The overall team is suffering from groupthink.

Correct answer(s):

1. Groupthink

Case Study: Question 2 of 2

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You're the leader of the events committee at the local community college. Your group is experiencing communication problems during meetings, and not all members are contributing to their fullest.

Access the learning aid Events Committee Meeting to review the planning discussion from several meetings ago.

Answer the questions in order.

Question

As team leader, how should you address this dysfunctional behavior?

Options:

1. Take the position that the team isn't examining last year's cost issues carefully enough. Ask why it wouldn't happen again. Argue for getting a more reliable caterer even if you would prefer to use the same one. If that doesn't generate

different options to the potential high costs, have Jackie and Wanda and Carlos and Tyrone pair up to discuss the problem.

2. Distribute the meeting agenda in advance and have the team discuss the caterer situation by e-mail before the meeting. If that doesn't work, try interrupting Wanda and Carlos. Point out to them that they're dominating the conversation and influencing the less vocal members.

3. Encourage Jackie and Tyrone to add to the discussion instead of just going along with what everyone else says. Let them know you value their experience and that the team needs everyone to contribute. Tell them to interrupt anytime, especially when others seem to be dominating the discussion.

Answer

Option 1: This is the correct option. Playing devil's advocate and trying to poke holes in the prevailing group's opinions may encourage others to think critically. Creating subgroups changes the team dynamic and is another way to avoid a groupthink situation.

Option 2: This is an incorrect option. Team members in groupthink will probably still "go with the flow" in an e-mail discussion. The key is to get them thinking for themselves without team influence. Interrupting Wanda and Carlos isn't appropriate. Asking them to let others speak isn't a good strategy to address groupthink.

Option 3: This is an incorrect option. Asking relative nonparticipants to join in with a groupthink situation will not achieve the important goal of getting diverse input. It just adds energy to the group mind-set.

Correct answer(s):

1. Take the position that the team isn't examining last year's cost issues carefully enough. Ask why it wouldn't happen again. Argue for getting a more reliable caterer even if you would prefer to use the same one. If that doesn't generate different options to the potential high costs, have Jackie and Wanda and Carlos and Tyrone pair up to discuss the problem.

5. Summary

Teams that have problems communicating in team meetings will be unable to reach their potential. Dysfunctional behaviors that result from these problems align with a spectrum of behavior from dominance to withdrawal.

Interrupters, overtalkers, and overly critical team members reflect the dominant end of the spectrum, where a few members edge the others out of the discussion. Other dysfunctional behaviors relate to team members who are too withdrawn, such as noncontributors and those who exhibit groupthink.

You can use specific strategies for addressing these behaviors, which can turn the team environment into a safe place where all members contribute.

Achieving Healthy Collaboration on a Team

Learning Objectives

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *recommend strategies for fostering collaboration on a team*
- *recognize the reasons why a team leader must find the balance between competition and collaboration*

1. Balancing competition and collaboration

It's Friday afternoon and most of your team members have left for the day. Two members remain, finishing up some boring paperwork. As usual, they decide to have a race to see who can finish first. The loser will buy the winner a soft drink on the way out. You're glad to see your team members having a little fun. Or, are you? Teammates are supposed to collaborate, not compete with each other.

Is there any amount of competition that's appropriate on a team? Shouldn't team members collaborate on all things?

Unfettered competition is collaboration's polar opposite. When competition isn't controlled, it creates an atmosphere of distrust.

But the other extreme, super-collaboration, is also unhealthy for a team. Achieving the right amount of collaboration is one of the key requirements for a high-performance team.

Select both extremes to learn why they have a negative effect on team performance.

> **Unfettered competition**
> When team members are highly focused on competition, they put their individual goals ahead of team goals. Competitive teammates become opponents, withholding information and resources from one another for personal advantage. When your team members are in competition, there's inevitably friction, distrust, and anxiety.
>
> **Super-collaboration**
> Like lemmings going over a cliff, extreme collaboration leads to groupthink – a lack of diverse and critical thinking. When putting the group's needs first is taken to an extreme, individual needs are ignored. Also, when achieving full consensus becomes more important than efficiently arriving at good decisions, team progress slows.

As a team leader, you can follow general guidelines to achieve a balance between competition and super-collaboration.

It's important to reward ambition. Ambitious team members are often valuable high achievers. But stress the importance of team progress and the importance of consensus in decision making.

Emphasize **how** to reach your team goals as well as the desired end results. End goals will naturally drive the competitive members of the team. Putting more emphasis on process – how the team will work together to get the work done – will balance that.

For most people, competition is fun, and it's one way that team members can motivate themselves. To moderate the appeal of competing, try to adjust the viewpoint of members who focus on beating others. Point out that working with others on the team can make things easier and more fun, while building relationships at the same time.

Question

Why must a team leader find the balance between competition and collaboration?

Options:

1. Too much competition will negatively affect team relationships
2. Highly competitive team members will tend to keep things to themselves
3. Having to reach consensus on every issue can be a slow and tedious process
4. Insufficient competition leads to an unmotivated team
5. Too much collaboration leads to employees keeping information to themselves in hopes of personal advancement

Answer

Option 1: This is a correct option. Competition creates friction between team members and, taken to extremes, will affect team interactions.

Option 2: This is a correct option. Competitive teammates may withhold valuable information and resources from one another for personal advantage.

Option 3: This is a correct option. When teams feel they must reach full consensus on even small issues, team progress is slowed.

Option 4: This is an incorrect option. Intra-team competition isn't required for a team to perform effectively, whereas collaboration is vital.

Option 5: This is an incorrect option. Extreme collaboration can have harmful effects on member input, but it's competition that leads to the hoarding of information.

Correct answer(s):

1. Too much competition will negatively affect team relationships
2. Highly competitive team members will tend to keep things to themselves
3. Having to reach consensus on every issue can be a slow and tedious process

2. Team-oriented messages

As a team leader, you will usually have to foster collaboration rather than competition to achieve the right balance of the two. To increase collaboration, you can employ two strategies in particular: use team-oriented messages and create team-oriented assignments.

When communications with your team emphasize a team approach to achieving common goals, you provide context and motivation for working as a team.

You also give members a reason to get beyond personality or value differences. Team-oriented messages stress team goals over individual goals.

Three categories of team-oriented messages you can use are those that link tasks to team goals, encourage thinking as a team, and foster sharing and supporting of others.

Select the suggested types of team-oriented messages for more information.

Link tasks to team goals

When explaining or giving direction about individual tasks, always reinforce how those tasks fit within the team's overall activities and how they contribute to team success. Communications should highlight the connection between individual tasks and overall team goals.

Encourage thinking as a team

Team meetings provide a primary venue for emphasizing the importance of thinking as a team. Whenever possible, turn the focus toward overall team goals, not just the achievement of individual milestones. Acknowledge individual goals, but point out how they fit into these overall team goals.

Foster sharing and supporting

As team leader, you need to encourage team members to share information and resources with one another and be open to one another's perspectives. Teammates should readily support each other through mentoring and coaching and be quick to share problems as they arise. As a leader, find ways to facilitate the sharing of best practices and new ideas.

Irina is a team leader whose team members aren't working well together. To get her team members in more of a collaborative mind-set, she encourages them to think of their responsibilities in light of the team as a whole.

One of her team members, Heinz, is trying to maintain his perfect record of never having missed a submission deadline. But if Heinz rushes his project to do so, Irina is afraid that project quality will suffer.

So Irina reminds Heinz that the team is committed to the highest quality and he should set aside his needs for what's best for the team as a whole.

Irina also notices that one of her other team members, Brian, is struggling to meet his project deadline. Because Heinz has a vast amount of experience that would be helpful, Irina asks him to work with Brian. Despite Heinz's desire to stay on schedule, Irina reschedules his project. The delay is a minor inconvenience, and the opportunity to pitch in to help a teammate is far more important. She reminds everyone that collaboration is where the team's true strength lies.

Question

Which are examples of leaders using team-oriented messages to foster collaboration?

Options:

1. "Kira, Bruno, and Ava have volunteered for advanced training and certification. This will increase the team's skill set and credibility!"

2. "Thanks for coming to the project kickoff call everyone. The tasks you will be performing will contribute greatly to the company's knowledge base and help us reach our goals."

3. "Please bring copies of your potential clients lists to the weekly sales meeting. Those with an excess should share with those who have too few."

4. "Let's start a weekly contest to see which pair of you can clear the most items from your agendas by Friday. The winners get Friday afternoon off."

5. "The top five performers on each team will be given full-time positions, so it's time to pull together, share resources, and help them out."

Answer

Option 1: This is a correct option. This team-oriented message ties the pursuit of personal goals to overall team goals.

Option 2: This is a correct option. An effective type of team-oriented message is one that explains how individual responsibilities, such as tracking lessons learned, contribute to team goals.

Option 3: This is a correct option. As a team leader, your messages need to encourage information and resource sharing for the benefit of the team.

Option 4: This is an incorrect option. Encouraging contests sends the wrong kind of message when the goal is to foster collaboration.

Option 5: This is an incorrect option. Team-oriented messages should encourage people to work together and share for the good of the team, not for individual gain.

Correct answer(s):

1. "Kira, Bruno, and Ava have volunteered for advanced training and certification. This will increase the team's skill set and credibility!"
2. "Thanks for coming to the project kickoff call everyone. The tasks you will be performing will contribute greatly to the company's knowledge base and help us reach our goals."
3. "Please bring copies of your potential clients lists to the weekly sales meeting. Those with an excess should share with those who have too few."

3. Team-oriented assignments

In addition to what you say as a leader and the way you communicate team goals, the work assignments you give can foster collaboration. In particular, you can use team-oriented assignments to build collaboration in two ways: by assigning tasks to partners or subgroups, and by designating mentors.

Select each way a leader can use team-oriented assignments to build collaboration for more information.

Assign tasks to partners or subgroups

You foster a greater sense of collaboration when team members must share ownership and responsibility for results. Assigning tasks to partners or subgroups, rather than choosing to assign work individually, also forces noncollaborative team members to relinquish some control over their work.

For instance, if selecting suppliers is typically a task that a single person performs, try assigning it to a pair. You may benefit from two points of view as well.

Designate mentors

Assign experienced team members as mentors or coaches to new or less-skilled team members. Mentors will tend to feel responsible for their teammates and for helping them meet their team responsibilities.

To foster collaboration on her team, Irina takes scheduling – a task usually assigned to a single person – and assigns it to a three-person committee. This way, one person's views will not dominate, and the committee members will learn to work together to reach consensus. As with all team assignments, Irina ensures that each member contributes by requiring team evaluations every three months.

Irina, in working to increase collaboration on the team she leads, also uses her ability to assign work to its best advantage.

She assigns Barbara, a team member who's a bit competitive and not team-oriented by nature, to mentor a less experienced team member. Irina informs Barbara she'll be partially accountable for the other person's performance over the next eight weeks.

At the end of the eight weeks, Irina notices a marked improvement in Barbara's attitude. She also notices that the performance of the other team member has improved, because he and Barbara came together as a team.

Question

Which are examples of team leaders fostering collaboration using team-oriented assignments?

Options:

1. "OK. Let's break up into pairs to write the three documents."

2. "From now on, we're going to track missed deadlines. I will assign mentors to work with anyone who's having problems."

3. "Fergus, I know you're busy, but I need you to coach Yvonne on how to conduct interviews correctly."

4. "Let's all take responsibility for one of the action items and see who can finish first."

5. "Keep in mind that the time you spend filling out the project evaluations will benefit the team in the long run."

Answer

Option 1: This is a correct option. Assigning shared tasks is an effective way to use your position as team lead to foster collaboration.

Option 2: This is a correct option. Designating mentors can improve performance and foster collaboration.

Option 3: This is a correct option. Assigning a coach to a team member who needs help will increase collaboration.

Option 4: This is an incorrect option. To foster collaboration, you should assign work to subgroups and get people working together, not separately.

Option 5: This is an incorrect option. This is a team-oriented message that will foster collaboration, not a team-oriented assignment.

Correct answer(s):

1. "OK. Let's break up into pairs to write the three documents."
2. "From now on, we're going to track missed deadlines. I will assign mentors to work with

anyone who's having problems."

3. "Fergus, I know you're busy, but I need you to coach Yvonne on how to conduct interviews correctly."

After you've successfully balanced collaboration and competition, you'll have team members who display certain characteristics:

- Team members are not afraid to speak up to ensure the team's needs are met and goals are achieved. There may be resolvable conflicts where differences and issues are discussed regarding barriers to meeting team goals.
- Team members are aware of their responsibilities, deliver on their commitments, meet deadlines, and take responsibility for their mistakes.
- Team members are more self-sufficient. They organize, schedule, and manage their own work.
- Team members put the team's needs first and their personal advancement second.
- Team members go beyond what's required of them, taking on tasks outside their normal scope and volunteering to coach, mentor, or assist colleagues.
- Because team members are motivated by the task at hand and working with the team, managers don't have to spend time and effort motivating them.

4. Summary

Collaboration is central to accomplishing anything in a team situation, but it's possible to have "too much of a good thing." Extreme collaboration leads to sameness and groupthink. Competition, although not always harmful, can work against collaboration and must also be kept in check to avoid a trust-deficient team environment.

Two types of strategies are available to leaders to help strike the right balance of competition and collaboration: team-oriented messages and team-oriented assignments. As a leader, you can use communication and task assignments to integrate individual members' goals into team goals, and focus members on performing well as a team.

Supplement

Selecting the link title opens the resource in a new browser window.

Follow-on Activity

Access the follow-on activity Competition or Collaboration to assess your current team in relation to competition and collaboration.