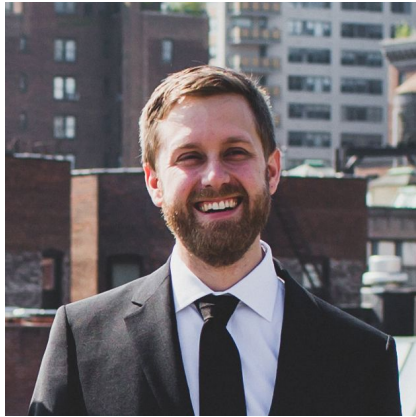


Title:

Developing communication patterns

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Headshot:



Organizations which design systems are constrained to produce designs which are copies of the communication structures of these organizations.

Conway's Law, Melvin Conway

Your job as a manager is to help your team work together effectively. Because the challenge is bigger than any one person, what your team ships will reflect the communication that happens. By developing communication patterns within and around your team, you'll improve what gets shipped. Here are some ideas on how to begin:

Be a good listener

First, you need to understand what communication patterns are established, so look for the conversations that are already happening. Who is talking to whom, and what about? This will take time. At the beginning, the team won't automatically trust you and may be guarded. Respect that. To build trust, you'll need to be present whenever you're asked for, and prove yourself as an active, empathetic and useful listener. As you build trust, you'll be let in to more conversations. The same is true for communication outside your team. As you work with other parts of your company, you'll identify the conversations you have a stake in, and can earn the trust to be invited in the future.

Look ahead

You can further earn the team's trust and make them more efficient by anticipating the questions they will have. For instance, wherever your team members' work overlaps, they will need to be aligned on how their work will interface. Junior team members are not always going to plan for that, and there's a risk of wasted effort if an agreed upon interface isn't defined early enough. By anticipating that, you can ensure they're communicating with each other early enough in the process to build towards the same goal.

Be a hub

There are only so many questions you can answer, so it's important to learn to route questions to others. For instance, maybe it's better for a member of your team to chat with a PM directly: she may be more familiar with the implementation and could answer more of the team's questions. This is a powerful tool, but use it with care. Not everyone will love answering questions and even for those that do, there's still a limit to the number of questions one person can answer.

Provide visibility

Your job is more than just handling questions; you've got a mandate from the wider organization and direction you need to give the team. You're responsible for providing visibility to that mandate and its related workstreams. Smart people often work better when they know *why* something is important, so connect dots between day-to-day work and the big picture when new requests are made. How does fixing a bug improve someone's life or grow the business? Help the team understand where they fit in the company and where the company fits in the world. Equally important is helping the company understand the strengths and value of your team. Visibility runs both ways.

Protect your team's time

An endless stream of meetings, chats, and emails will not write the code itself. It's just as important to help your team focus so they have time to do work. It's usually worth asking yourself—and others—is this a good use of time? One of the easiest ways you can make the team more productive is by finding ways to ensure communication happens without requiring them to break their flow. This often why standups happen at the beginning of the day—it means less time lost context switching. "No meeting Tuesdays" is the same idea.

Find the question behind the question

As you grow as a leader, you will be brought into ambiguous situations and it will become harder to know what you can share. The right answer might not be obvious and there will be reasons you cannot share everything. Resist the urge to let this be a reason to depersonalize your relationships or to ask the team to "just trust me." Instead, use those moments to empathize. Listen hard and understand their question behind the question. You might not be able to give them the sensitive information they're asking for, but you can earn trust by demonstrating that you understand their concerns.

As your team trusts you, you'll find yourself cc'd on more emails and drawn into more conversations. You'll be asked to provide context more often. You'll be brought problems and given the opportunity to help edit and focus the communication that's happening. Notice the outcomes of the conversations that happen when you're not in the room. These are all signs that you're establishing communication patterns, and that's one of the most important things we can do as managers.

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