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Improve communication to lift performance

1. Check how often your team are able to meet and communicate on a face-to-face basis. The MIT research confirms that in-person meetings are preferable to tele- or phone-conferencing, particularly when there are a lot of people on the call.

Email is a very poor substitute (in terms of boosting performance) for personal meetings.

2. Think carefully about how your office space is designed. Layouts which promote people meeting one another as they move about are better than those which reduce chance meetings.

3. Encourage people to communicate energetically, including using gestures. Also, think carefully about how you use meetings. Information type meetings may be better cancelled and replaced by an informative email.

4. Make sure standard speaking turns in meetings are short and sweet. Encourage everyone to contribute their ideas. If necessary, formalise turn-taking in some meetings.

5. Change team membership if you find ideas consistently aren't as fresh as needed. Alternatively, increase the amount of input you source from outside of the team.

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE!

Lifting call centre productivity

Call centres are so often the epitome of poor performance. If it's not high staff turn-over, then it's low average handling time (AHT) or awful customer satisfaction ratings. Chances are it's all of these indicators and more.

You might be suspicious if someone suggested that teams having common coffee breaks would have a markedly positive impact on performance. Indeed, as manager, you'd be extremely concerned that productivity might fall even further!

Yet one bank call centre recently implemented just this advice from Sandy Pentland, Director of MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory. And they're very pleased they did. Overall, AHT fell 8%. Worst-performing teams saw an impressive 20% reduction in AHT. It's no surprise that the bank is implementing changes in all 10 of its call centres (affecting 25,000 employees). They're expecting the initiative to deliver around \$15 million in productivity increases annually.

It's not about the coffee

Performance improvements had little to do with coffee or even the break, per se. Both were around to the same extent before the changes. However, it was the scheduling of breaks that was vital. Whole teams took their coffee breaks at the same time. The outcome, a lot more communication occurred between members of the same team.

The major insight from this study is that the single most important predictor of team success is team communication. As an example, they show that the number of face-to-face exchanges between team members accounts for around 35% variation in team performance. This is great confirmation of UGM research that highlights the importance of communication (specifically including listening as the MIT study does) on team success.

The MIT team has deepened insights and replicated findings over the past 7 years, in 21 different organisations, involving 2,500 people for up to six weeks at a time. So the research is rock solid.

Researchers used ground breaking electronic 'social badges' to gather unique data about exchanges between people. About the size of a deck of cards, the badges are worn around the neck, collecting over 100 data points per minute. For example, they detect proximity to other badges, non-verbal gestures and aspects of conversation – but not the content of the communication.

Three key communications factors

The research has identified three key elements of communication that predict expected level of team

success. These are energy, engagement and exploration. Patterns for success vary little, irrespective of team type or goal. Let's take a closer look at each aspect.

First, 'energy' measures the number and nature of exchanges between individuals in the team. A single exchange is a comment and some acknowledgement back (for example, a nod of the head). In team settings there will be many of these. Energy levels vary within teams. Routine type meetings have lower energy than those where someone mentions a discovery or an opportunity.

Next there is 'engagement'. This looks at how energy is distributed among team members. When all members have relatively equal and relative high energy, then engagement is extremely strong – and so usually is relative performance. Teams with clusters of contributors and clusters of non-participants don't do nearly as well as those where there is equal contribution all round.

Finally, research found that high performing teams also forge many more links outside of the team than low performing teams. Pentland calls this 'exploration'. Exploration is especially important for teams charged with creativity and innovation. This reinforces the ideas about X-Teams outlined by Deborah Ancona. It also corresponds with Jon Katzenberg's notion of teams simply being a particular configuration of nodes, themselves all in a much greater network. Boundaries, in the knowledge economy, are a lot more porous. As a result, boundary-spanning (or exploration) is an essential team behaviour.

How do successful teams communicate?

Researchers found that everyone in successful teams talk and listen, roughly in equal measure. Contributions are short and sweet. Members face each other and hold energetic conversations. This includes using energetic gesturing.

Members also connect directly with one another – not just the leader. This suggests that influence (or leadership) is shared among team members. See the UGM briefings archive for previous briefings on how teams distribute leadership.

High performing teams also regularly include side conversations and 'back-channelling' as part of their communications protocols. Finally, members periodically seek information from outside of the team, which is subsequently fed back.

Communicate, communicate, communicate!

How does your own team rate? How would you rate its energy, engagement and exploration over time? Why not map these aspects when you're working together and then share your insights with members?