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To Improve Team Productivity, Focus on Improving Communication

By Marie Peeler

Nothing is more important to team productivity than how well a team communicates. Communication that increases understanding, generates important insights, and talks about what matters drives sound team decision-making, powerful action-planning, and on-target achievement of results.

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Yet too often **team communication** is limited to the delivery of tactical status updates with team members failing to communicate about those critically important issues that will make a difference. Sometimes, team communication is derailed by debilitating fear of triggering conflict. Other times, power imbalances cause team members to shut down. On some teams, the culture simply does not require team members to be prepared for discussions or to contribute fully.

If teams are not showing up ready to engage and communicating openly and honestly about the issues that matter, the team simply cannot be productive.

So what is the leader of such a team to do?

First and Foremost, Examine Your Own Behavior

Leaders are often quite unaware of the impact they have on squelching honest communication on their teams. Do you “punish” or intimidate team members who state opinions that you disagree with or who offer information that is uncomfortable to hear?

Some of the most well-intentioned leaders that *claim* to encourage and value frank communication unwittingly shut down people who attempt to state a differing point of view. Remember, as the leader, your whisper will be heard as a shout.

If people believe that you are not open, they will simply retreat and keep their opinions (and valuable information) to themselves. The best thing to do, even if you disagree, is to thank the person for the information and offer to consider what you have just heard.



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Publicly Acknowledge and Thank Team Members for Communicating in Productive Ways

One CEO who was respectfully challenged in a meeting went to the person after the meeting to thank and encourage them for speaking up. That's great, but it would have been even better if the CEO had done it right there and then in the meeting.

It would have demonstrated that people who speak up will not be chastised or punished—indeed, just the opposite—and it would have given the CEO a teaching moment opportunity to point out what was so productive about the team member's compassionate but direct communication style.

Create Opportunities to Discuss Issues

Create specific opportunities to discuss strategic issues on which you need team members to weigh in with their best thinking. As Patrick Lencioni points out in his book *Death by Meeting*, we try to pack too many conflicting agendas into our meetings. We need tactical updates, but they often squeeze out important strategic work when we try to handle it all in weekly staff meetings. Lencioni advocates for monthly strategic meetings that are reserved exclusively for the discussion of one or two important topics.

Make Productive Communication a Part of the Culture

It's important to create the expectation that team members will prepare for discussions and contribute fully. It's one thing to say it but you may have to back it up by aborting a discussion that it is obvious team members have not taken the time to prepare for.

By saying something like, "It's apparent that we are not prepared to have this discussion today. Please go back, collect your data and your thoughts, and be prepared to reconvene and have a meaningful discussion next Tuesday at 9 a.m.," team members will know that you are unwilling to waste time having a discussion that no one has taken the time to prepare for.

Sometimes people are prepared but unwilling to speak up, often due to fear of triggering conflict. When you sense that someone is holding back, pointedly ask them what they are thinking—and then support them.

Ensure That Communication Leads to Action

Talking about what matters most, and making sure that issues—even difficult ones—are fully discussed, are critically important for insuring that the team all has the right data upon which to base decisions and action. As the leader, it is your job to make sure that discussions don't stall without resolutions and that concrete plans are made and acted upon as a result.

There is a tendency, after a difficult discussion, for everyone to breathe a deep sigh. It's not uncommon at this point for people, remembering that the world has been moving on while they've been engaged in this heartfelt discussion, to suddenly move to disperse as everyone remembers something that they should be attending to. But wait. You've got to push the point here. "What are we going to do next as a result of this discussion?" is the key question.

Improving team communication is imperative if we are to improve team productivity. Time spent on assessing and improving your team's communication style and behaviors will pay significant dividends in the improved functioning and productivity of your team.



Marie Peeler is the principal of Peeler Associates, a Pembroke, Massachusetts-based organization that helps leaders enhance their leadership effectiveness, focus on what's most important, and achieve their goals. Believing that growth is vital in maintaining and increasing leadership effectiveness—growth of individual leaders, growth of leadership teams, and growth of organizations—Marie helps leaders grow through executive coaching, teambuilding, organizational development, leadership training, business retreats, and keynote speaking. For more information, please visit www.peelerassociates.com.

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