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THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN TEAM EFFECTIVENESS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract:

Teams have become the foundation of progressive organizations, and information relating to the determinants that contribute to team accomplishment have extensive connotations for organizations aspiring to augment team effectiveness. The question of uncovering the characteristic features of communication and the role of communication among other factors as a determinant of team effectiveness is the central aim of this study. The research challenge central to this study is to find ways to achieve a desirable communication level that facilitates team performance. The empirical analysis involved collection of data through focus group interviews involving 5 participants in a prominent Pakistani bank using an interview guide featuring semi-structured questions. The qualitative data analysis revealed that 'open' communication is a characteristic feature allowing a team to be effective. The barriers to team effectiveness were identified and recommendations for further research were also presented.

KEY WORDS:

characteristic features of team effectiveness, non-verbal behavior, barriers to team effectiveness, listening, open communication, team leader communication.

INTRODUCTION:

The use of teams is widespread in all types of organizations given the rapid globalization of the market place, increased speed and volume of information available and the highly competitive nature of work environments. Since teams are better suited to address complex tasks and provide collaborative solutions to most organizational problems there is an increased reliance on them. Thus, the quality and composition of a team becomes important when determining organizational performance. This finding renders any study on team performance and effectiveness as fruitful for exploration.

Research shows that effective communication in a team is a critical factor determining team performance (Hitt, et al., 2006). On the basis of this statement, this study will examine the characteristic features of communication as they exist in team environments. Increased listening, openness to member viewpoints and suggestions, and delivery of quick and appropriate feedback have been suggested by researchers as communication-based behaviors facilitating team functioning (Dyer, 1987; Anonymous, 2008; Hirokawa et al., 2000). The present study will analyze the role of communication among other factors as a determinant of team effectiveness. This aspect is important because communication is included among the seven basic classes that deal with the principles of team standards which determine the level of

team effectiveness (Swezey and Salas, 1992). At this point it would be useful to view how the concepts of performance and effectiveness are defined by researchers. Performance is defined as the execution of an action; something accomplished, or what is going on inside the team. Effectiveness is the extent to which a team accommodates the demands which are placed upon it. Thus, it is evident that effectiveness applies specifically to the accomplishment of the goals, achievements and aims as characterized by the requirements of the context or the stakeholders. On the other hand, performance applies to how well teamwork and task work is accomplished (Henderson and Walkinshaw, 2002).

Current literature on team effectiveness cites the role of communication characteristics as critical to the team process on which team effectiveness is based (Cowie, 2007; Ivancevich et al., 2005; Keen, 2003). In fact, communication growth influences team processes and performance, since members possessing effective communication will be more productive and enhance team accomplishment (Dionne, et al., 2004).

Based on the aims of the proposed study stated earlier, the research questions are as follows:

1. What constitutes effective communication in team environments?
2. What are the ways to achieve a desirable communication level that facilitates the working of an effective team?

The first question will attempt to analyze the meaning of 'effective communication' when examined in the context of team working. Here it becomes necessary to state that a team environment refers to a collaborative setting where members achieve shared goals through collective effort, with each one working within the boundaries of his role and yet aiding others in an attempt to help the team inch closer to its goal. The second question will seek answers to what is a 'desirable communication level' and how it can be achieved in order to help a team when in the process of achieving its objectives. In other words, it will be an attempt to determine how team performance contributes to team effectiveness. The study will seek to find answers to the research questions in the Pakistani context where no research is available in this context and which remain unexplored in regard to the attributes of team interchanges, team performance and subsequently team effectiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Communication in team environments is the main aim of this study. An attempt in this review is to cover aspects related to what is communication in teams, the role of interchanges in the group process and the features of effective communication as they impact team effectiveness.

West, et al., (2004) suggest that communication is an important component of team effectiveness. This is because it is a key element of the team process allowing team members to connect with each other. Through interactions members are able to share information, generate ideas and take part in decision making and problem solving. Team communication has been described as the backbone of a team's existence and is the crux of the task and social dimensions, of all groups (Fisher, 1970; Tyson, 1989). Tyson (1989) further states, "For a group to come into existence, organize itself, and develop into an effective team requires above all else good communication between members" (p.77). Dickinson and McIntyre (1997) state that communication is the binding force for all the elements of teamwork actions, including team adjustment, leadership advisement, response, support and planning. In fact, communication is considered among the most important forecasters of team performance.

Recurring communication and inclusion of the opinions of team members are meaningful for team functioning. Consideration given to frequency of team communication, maintaining the balance of team member communication input by allowing all team members to express their views renders communication as a principal variable in team success (DeSanctis and Jiang, 2005). Webber (2002) maintains that successful teams are those which participate in team processes effectively through efficient communication. DeSanctis and Jiang (2005) also approve communication as one of the most important mediums of team accomplishment.

Research shows that open communication is critical for an effective team and that effective communication within the team is an essential factor of team accomplishment (Dionne et al., 2004). The utilization of teams is one of the most prevalent developments across organizations over the past 20 years (Osterman, 2000). The abundant use of teams reflects a global economy where a large volume of work of a complex nature needs to be done in a short span of time. The volume of knowledge and skill required for the purpose of completing the work is beyond the ability of a single person. Teams, therefore, emerge as the principal means of addressing complex issues, achieving objectives, and meeting dynamic and demanding

goals (Buzaglo and Wheelan 1994).

In view of this scenario, it becomes imperative to view models of team effectiveness which establish that input and process factors have a relationship with team performance or effectiveness (Hackman and Morris, 1975; McGrath, 1991). These features include one important process factor which influences the comprehensive performance of a team and that is communication. Without this, team interaction would not be possible and members would be unable to share information, ideas, discuss issues or strategies and develop solutions (Hassal, 2009).

Barnlund (1959) views communication as functional for team performance as it allows information and critical resources to be put together. The functional perspective seeks to explain in theory the connection between team communication and decision making conduct. It has been identified as a key paradigm in team decision making (Baltes, et al., 2002). A determining characteristic of the functional aspect is the basic argument that communication is a social tool for members to use to fulfill some prerequisites of effective decision making (Gouran, 1991; Hirokawa, 1985). Hackman's (2005) model views communication as playing a conciliating role in team decision making; suggesting that other factors (team member abilities and skills) bring about decision making performance (Hirokawa, 1988; Salazar, 1996). This is in contrast to the functional perspective where communication is considered as the central focus in team decision making performance. Based on the functional perspective, team decision making involves the completion of certain 'requisite' functions. These are achieved through team communication. 'Requisite' functions are the key questions that teams must address in order to make decisions. Effective decision making depends on how well the communication of team members fulfills the requisite functions (Hirokawa, 1988). Evidence from the empirical testing of the functional perspective suggests the use of five requisite functions. These requisite functions reveal that the following are used when investigating the connection between communication and the decision making performance of teams: Orientation, Problem Definition, Critical Development, Solution Development and Solution Evaluation.

Orientation refers to communication concerned with managing the team. This communication functions to make known team operating procedures and other logistics which specify how the team will resolve or approach the problem.

Problem Definition is concerned with communication that attempts to identify and define the nature of the team's task/problem or the problem's causes, effects and symptoms.

Critical Development deals with communication concerned with the value(s) to be employed in evaluating decision options or the goals or standards that acceptable choices or solutions must meet in order to become options worthy of consideration.

Solution Development is communication concerned with any concrete, particular, specific proposal for action.

Solution Evaluation refers to communication that indicates evaluation of a proposal. It is communication for or against a proposal which includes positive and negative consequences (Salazar, 1996; Hassal, 2009).

To sum up, the majority of studies on the role of communication in team effectiveness from where this review is derived focus on work teams. The role of communication among other factors as a determinant of team effectiveness has been identified leading this researcher to believe that there is a need to explore the phenomenon in Pakistani workplace environments. An understanding of what makes communication effective in teams will help professionals better analyze their current practices and suggest ways better ways to enhance team performance and effectiveness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

A. Research design:

This study was initiated out of personal interest in the quality and effectiveness of teams in the work place environment. Keeping in view Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) notion of interpretive inquiry, a qualitative research methodology will be used in order to understand the meanings of the phenomena offered by the research participants. Within qualitative research, a case study approach will be used to examine a phenomenon in-depth and to acquire data that results in expounding, comprehending, surmising, and/or regulating the distinctive case. This small-scale study will examine a single case and will give a narrative account of life as it is in a social situation. The case study approach will be particularly appropriate for the objectives of this research study as it will generate a thick description that attempts to answer 'what' and 'how' questions. Also, it will offer explanations from the 'direct participants in the case', predict the actions, or events that will follow within the distinctive case, and regulate any attempts to influence the understanding, attitudes, and/or actions taking place in an individual case (Woodside, 2010: p. 11 – 12).

B. Research participants:

The research participants were six in number, belonging to a prestigious national bank. The designations ranged from manager to senior manager level having five to twelve years of work experience. The education level included both Bachelor's and Master's in Business related disciplines.

C. Research tools/ data collection instruments:

The study used focus group interview since it offers a realistic starting point for qualitative research allowing discussion on relevant subjects in a non-directive manner. An interview guide facilitated in eliciting the required information pertinent to the aims of the study and the research questions.

Ethical considerations:

A letter requesting the targeted group to participate in research, along with a consent form was dispatched to the participants.

As expected the proposed study yielded information on how teams in the Pakistani environment perceive 'effective communication'. Furthermore, the data revealed what team members in the above context considered to be a 'desirable communication level' which contributes to team performance and subsequently, to team effectiveness.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

The focus group interview yielded a plethora of information which supported earlier findings, negated some and pointed out directions for research into areas unexplored in this context in Pakistan. To answer the first research question regarding the characteristic features of communication in team environments, the following findings came to light:

1. The importance of oral communication was without doubt considered indispensable in team meetings since they would not be possible otherwise. This fact is evident in the research of West, et al., 2004; Fisher, 1970; Tyson, 1989 & Dickinson and McIntyre 1997.
2. The participants of this research emphasized that clarity, preciseness and completeness were necessary for the communication to be effective.
3. The participants were of the view that when information was lost due to Chinese whispers, clarity was marred.
4. It was further stated that Language One (L1) should be used wherever necessary so that oral communication becomes clear, precise and complete. This finding was not evident in the literature review although researchers cited were of European and Asian origin where English is not the first language. The focus was on 'communication' and not on the language used to communicate.
5. Listening also received attention since the participants were of the view that 'being heard' was crucial for the success of the communication which in turn would render the team process effective.
6. The participants of the study emphasized that hearing but not listening, and interruptions of team members were counterproductive and denied understanding of the issues under discussion for team members.
7. Listening as an act of communication is valuable when a team is brainstorming issues which lead to decision making. This finding is substantiated by the research of Hirokawa et al., (2002) when reporting the results which revealed what factors contribute to group success and failure. "Good listening" is reported as a feature of group communication (p.579). Rocine & Irwin (1994) included 'listening to others' as a feature found in effective team members who adopt balanced roles within a team. Dyer (1987) also supports increased listening as a factor which is a communication based indicator of effective team functioning.
8. Inability to listen to team members created communication barriers was revealed in the findings. Broome and Fullbright (1995) developed a model of barriers to group problem solving. They identified certain categories which can be viewed as factors inhibiting team effectiveness. Several of the categories seemed to support the idea that communication is critical for an effective team. Included in the communication barriers was the inability to listen effectively to team members.
9. In another study, Sidler and Lifton (1999) emphasized that communication in teams must be open. Open communication involves the two-way activity of soliciting feedback and using active listening techniques which promote understanding. Stevens and Campion (1994) maintain that listening is a core component of

communication providing a feedback loop. This distinguishes a team as effective. It reduces message distortion and is the key to producing accurate information which is meaningful to the team process. Participants of this study supported these findings with similar views regarding feedback.

10. Among the acts of communication, non-verbal communication was deemed as a characteristic feature which constitutes effective communication in a team at work. The participants of the study focused on the fact that when body language is not in harmony with other communication acts, such as listening and talking, the latter become meaningless and do not allow for team synergy. Thompson and Gooler (1996) maintain that the understanding of non verbal cues is important and must not be underestimated. Messages can be transmitted through use of space, positive body orientation, head and eye movements and other non verbal behaviours. It is important for team members to be aware of non-verbal messages communicated via body language. Eye contact in this regard is valuable for good communication to be achieved. Team members when cognizing others' body language also need to be aware of how their own is being understood. Stevens and Campion (1994) citing several researchers proclaim that non-verbal communication takes precedence over verbal communication at times referring to paralinguistics, kinesics, haptics, chronemics, iconics, proxemics and dress (Driskell et al. 1993; Birdwhistell, 1970). All these findings reveal that there is a need to increase the agreement between verbal and non-verbal messages and be able to identify and explicate the messages of others (Stevens & Campion, 1994).

11. While discussing the importance of listening and non-verbal communication in the light of the findings of this study, the participants revealed that the roles of the leader and leadership communication were extremely valuable for the success of the team process if they are in consonance with team goals and provide a facilitating effect. At this point when the researcher is presenting outcomes relating to the characteristic features of communication in team environments, previous research reveals that communication is central to team leader behaviours.

12. Patton & Down (2003) maintain that the maintenance functions of team leaders comprise encouraging team members to participate, addressing the emotional concerns of team members, allowing for open communication, listening and facilitating positive feedback. The key role of team leaders in providing an atmosphere for positive relational communication renders the team process effective. The participants of the research were divided on the issue of whether their meetings were effective or not. Those maintaining that their meetings were effective stated that their leaders encouraged open communication and displayed positive verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Tost, Giono & Larrik (2011) maintain that a leader's dominant behaviour produces negative perceptions of leader openness and leads to negative consequences in terms of team performance. These findings support the views of the participants of this research who maintained that their meetings were ineffective since their leader's communication behaviours were negative and affected team performance adversely. Baninjarian & Abdullah (2009) in the findings of their research state that the facilitator is the principal determinant influencing group effectiveness. Among the essential characteristics of a good group facilitator, the communication skills (verbal), eye contact (non-verbal) and being open-minded were considered important in producing effective groups.

13. Written communication was also considered necessary when delivering objectives to a team, since it makes the goals clear, provides for feedback in the form of a reply and serves as documentation or record according to the participants of the study. Research literature reviewed did not produce any findings to support written communication which may be considered as a neglected area in research on teams.

Coming to the second research question which seeks to uncover the ways to achieve a desirable communication level that facilitates the working of an effective team, the participants of this study revealed that several factors contributed in this regard. These are as follows:

1. Relationships and rapport among team members were considered as crucial to the success of the team process. It was stated that building a relationship was necessary for communication to be meaningful and effective. Relationships, according to the participants of the study, created dependency and provided for support for each other within a team. In order to build a relationship, communication is the only thing that will bridge the gap.

2. Furthermore, the participants were of the view that relationships with co-workers on a team provided a comfort level which allowed for the achievement of their goals and minimized conflict. Tannebaum et al. (1992) maintain that team building can enhance interpersonal relationships and thereby improve team processes. Hackman and Morris (1975) reveal in their research that effective teams have members displaying congenial and amicable interpersonal relations which help them to deal with conflicts and resolve process issues. Furthermore, active, willing and productive participation leads to team effectiveness. Shaw and Barret-Power (1998) suggest that a focus on relationship development is beneficial in terms of team members being able to work together to overcome problems and differences through effective communication, as well as evaluate how group processes are affected by their own

behavior. In addition, members will have a more realistic and less condemnatory attitude to differing behaviours and attitudes. Hirokawa et al., (2000) in the results of their study revealed that interpersonal relationships among team members signified by supportive behaviour and team unity attitudes influenced group success or failure.

3. Another finding of the study revealed that participants considered knowledge and skills related to the job as essential for achieving organizational goals through team process and performance. The knowledge and skills required were in reference to job skills and communication skills. Job skills if not accompanied by communication skills, would inhibit team performance and lead to failure in achieving team goals. Hirokawa et al., (2002) considered effective strategy, high levels of commitment and dedication, superior skills and knowledge among other characteristics influencing group success. Henderson and Walkinshaw (2002) maintain that team effectiveness refers particularly to the attainment of objectives, landmarks and goals as specified by the needs of the situation on the stakeholders. On the other hand, performance relates to how well team members perform the tasks and synergize. This study also supports these findings. To further support these findings, the research of Salas et al., (1992) also suggests that the ability of team members to work together over extended periods, the achievement of member needs, and the credibility of task outcomes facilitate team effectiveness. Teams which are capable of making efforts to accomplish team tasks possess sufficient knowledge and skills and are able to apply appropriate task performance strategies, contribute to effectiveness. All these factors show that team members are motivated to work together.

4. The participants of the study were of the view that if the team leader displayed positive team behaviours and attitudes, the team would display enhanced performance. Shanahan (2001) supports these findings by maintaining that each team member possesses individual task responsibilities. These in turn, are affected by how well members co-ordinate and support one another and by how well the leader performs his role.

Anonymous (2008) supports the view that the chances of positive outcomes can be influenced by managers who are able to control the design of teams provided they furnish adequate information, perform diverse job functions, belong to administrative backgrounds and form teams with the correct number of members and the right skill set. By skill set the researcher is referring to team members having technical expertise, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and good interpersonal skills, namely feedback, listening and conflict resolution. The participants of the study supported these views.

All these findings support Cohen and Bailey's (1997) definition of teams as groups of individuals sharing tasks and their outcomes interdependently, and are viewed as a social unit both by themselves as well as by others.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

The qualitative analyses undertaken as a result of this study support empirical and anecdotal evidence which suggests that communication, especially 'open' communication, is a characteristic feature which allows a team environment to be considered effective. The barriers to team effectiveness which fall within the realm of communication were unclear aims or objectives, communication, and role descriptions. In this regard clear communication was the way forward to achieving team effectiveness. In fact, all the key determinants required facilitation through communication in order for team effectiveness to be realizable.

The research study brought to light that if communication is to be enhanced within teams, it is essential to develop awareness of the following:

1. Communication needs to be frequent, regular, and face-to-face involving both team members and managers.
2. An atmosphere which is conducive to building trust, goodwill and comfort must be promoted where team members are able to discuss the issues without fear of rejection or chastisement.
3. Team members are allowed to decide acceptable communication behaviors.
4. Team members are responsible for the communication process.
5. Feedback is important for performance to be in consonance with team goals. It should be bias free, regular, clear and on time.

The study pointed the way to potential prolific grounds for future research in the areas of leader communication in Pakistan, since leadership aspects are subject to the organizational climate, that is, conditions at work, management practices, views of team members and the type of tasks. This area is critically important since the study revealed that the leader's experience of power affects team processes negatively if the communication does not facilitate high levels of performance within the team. Research

undertaken in this context would aim at determining ways to reduce the negative effects of dominating leader communication on team performance.

Research forays could also be made to examine other variables revealed in the present study related to team satisfaction. These include sense of ownership, motivation, rewards and appreciation. Both suggested areas of inquiry could increase our understanding of team building and team performance processes and aid in selection and training choices in the corporate arena. It is hoped that the present research study has laid the cornerstone to pursue these related areas of inquiry.

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APPENDICES:

Appendix: A

Interview Guide

Communication in Workplace

1. How do you value communication when delivering objectives?
2. In your opinion how far do your communication skills meet your communication objectives?

Teams Dynamics

1. How often do you work in teams?
2. How important is team performance in your workplace?
3. What constitutes the team process?

Communication in Teams

1. What is the single most important factor in the team process which affects team performance?
2. How important is communication in team decision making?
- 3.- What communication acts can you identify in this regard?
4. How does the varying skill level in terms of communication affect team performance?
5. How does communication affect relationships among team members?
6. Keeping in view the phenomenon of communication, how would you rate your team meetings? Effective or ineffective?
7. What reasons can you identify for ineffective communication?
8. What areas of support does your team communication extend to, as in contributing to fulfillment of needs, morale building?
9. What is the level of negative communication as in disagreements?
10. How does it affect team performance?
- 11.- What communication skills do you employ to overcome this?
- 12.- How does your team communication deliver feedback?

Appendix: B

Role of Communication in Team Effectiveness

Request for Research Participation

Dear _____

Research being a mandatory requirement for all faculty at The Institute of Business Management, promotes a spirit of inquiry, academic excellence and leads to problem solving in the area of the study. In keeping with this objective, you are requested to participate in a study entitled "Role of Communication in Team Effectiveness".

The main focus of this research is to

- explore the characteristic features of communication,
- determine the role of communication among other factors as a determinant of team effectiveness, and
- provide researchers and practitioners with recommendations regarding ways to achieve a desirable communication level that facilitates the working of an effective team.

Please be aware that should you agree to take part in this research it would be entirely your decision for which the researcher would be extremely grateful. The researcher would like to assure you that there are no risks to you or your organization. The researcher also wishes to inform you that a policy of confidentiality and nondisclosure of information forthcoming during the interview sessions, will be strictly adhered to. The information will be analyzed to fulfill the goals of the research and will remain anonymous and non-identifiable.

Should you have any queries the researcher would be happy to address them. Your early response in this regard would be appreciated.

Regards

Fareeda Ibad
Institute of Business Management
UAN: 111-002-004 ext: 308

Appendix: C

CONSENT FORM (AUDIO & VIDEO RECORDING)

Researcher name: Fareeda Ibad

Participant name: _____

Research title: Role of Communication in Team Effectiveness

I confirm that I have received the request to participate in research letter, and would be happy to oblige.
After reading the request letter I consent to participate in the above mentioned study.

Name / Signature: _____

Date: _____

¹Communication refers to the process of human beings responding to the symbolic behaviour of other persons. It is the sharing of experiences indirectly and vicariously, thereby creating meaning between two or more people through the interchange of thoughts, feelings and information.

²Team effectiveness is focusing on a real team to leverage performance in a challenging context; and developing co-operative behaviours and seamless links across the organization, enabling everyone to respond creatively to rapidly changing needs. – The Oxford Group

³Open communication refers to open discussion, effective listening, allowing all members to speak, feedback, willingness to ask questions and consider the views of team members. Hirokawa et al., 2000.

⁴Refers to a situation where information becomes distorted in the process of being passed on in turn by a number of people.

⁵See references.

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