

Cross Talk: Barriers to Effective Communication in Work Groups

Donna Roberson

### Abstract

This brief paper will examine aspects of group communication and examine some of the barriers to effective communication in work groups, such as lack of trust, competitive group members, one-way and two-way communication, and the communication channels used. Effective communication must be present to create a harmonious group that can work together to achieve results. Effective communication can also limit the amount of conflict that the group experiences. There are several strategies that can improve communication between group members.

## Introduction

Every human being has been or is a member of a group. A group can be defined as “a number of individuals who join together to achieve a goal” (Johnson & Johnson, 2006, p. 5). Examples of groups are families, church groups, Yoga classes, high school graduating classes, and work groups. Not all groups are effective. Effective groups achieve their objectives, achieve the needs and objectives of the group members, and can continue to work as a group over time (McShane and Von Glinow, 2005). There are many different characteristics of effective groups, but group success is impossible without effective communication, and it is essential when creating and maintaining groups. A number of different strategies can encourage group members to communicate more effectively with each other.

## Literature Review

### *Aspects of Communication*

In order for group members to interact cooperatively with one another and to achieve their goals, they must communicate effectively. “Communication refers to the process by which information is transmitted and understood between two or more people” (McShane & Von Glinow, 2005, p. 324). It is just as important for the receiver to interpret the message in the way it was intended as it is to receive the message in the first place. This includes all communication, which is not only verbal. Communication takes place whenever group members see, hear, smell, or touch one another (Johnson & Johnson, 2006).

Methods of communication can be verbal (spoken), nonverbal (body language, facial expressions, and so forth), and written. There are many variations in modes of communication—it can be face to face or by phone, it can be direct or passed through several people, or it can be interpreted through gender or cultural filters and misinterpreted. Miscommunication can occur at

several points between the sender communicating the message and the receiver getting and interpreting the message. Because of this, not all communication is effective, yet “effective communication is vital to all organizations because it coordinates employees, fulfills employee needs, supports knowledge management, and improves decision making” (McShane & Von Glinow, 2006, page 324). Improving communication can decrease conflict and encourage groups to share knowledge, become more productive, and achieve their common goals.

### *Communication and Conflict*

Conflicts occur due to lack of or clear communication (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). Establishing effective communication among group members can limit the amount of conflict they experience and encourage them to focus on their common goals in order to achieve success. Destructive conflict is possible when effective communication does not exist. Constructive conflict is possible in a harmonious group and can help team members discuss their differences by focusing on the issue instead of focusing on the people involved. When there are barriers to effective communication, misunderstandings can escalate into conflict if they are not addressed.

### *Barriers to Communication*

Barriers to communication can discourage cooperation and foster misunderstandings between group members. If unaddressed, simple barriers can escalate into conflict and ill will between group members. Communication barriers can occur due to several different factors, including a lack of trust, the communication channel used, a competitive group environment, using one-way or two-way communication, and using an inappropriate communication channel.

*Lack of trust.*

Trust is a fundamental element of a successful team. The level of trust increases or decreases during each interaction between group members (Johnson & Johnson, 2006); therefore, one miscommunication between group members can change the trust level, making the group more or less effective. Nothing valuable will get done if group members believe others are lying, withholding information, or sabotaging them (Colvin, 2006). If there is no culture of trust, group members will not communicate effectively; and if there is a lack of effective communication, group members can become distrustful of each other.

Group members must be both trusting and trustworthy. Trusting can be defined as “the willingness to risk beneficial or harmful consequences by making oneself vulnerable to other group members” (Johnson & Johnson, 2006, p. 125). Trustworthy can be defined as “the willingness to respond to another person’s risk taking in a way that ensures that the other person will experience beneficial consequences” (Johnson & Johnson, p. 125). Otherwise, group members will not communicate effectively or at all, and the group will become dysfunctional and not achieve its goals. Group communication is most powerful when the group interacts in a cooperative way, and when group members trust and like one another (Johnson & Johnson).

*The pitfalls of competitive groups.*

Competitive groups generally do not trust one another. Group members in competitive environments tend to withhold information, spread misinformation, undermine each other, gossip, and participate in other behavior that destroys the group. Effective communication is nearly impossible in a competitive environment, because every group member acts in a way that promotes his or her individual interest instead of the interest and health of the group. A

competitive group member generally communicates only when necessary in order to get what he or she needs, without any regard to the group as a whole.

Miscommunication or lack of communication is only one negative aspect of competitive group interaction. Competitive group members can intentionally communicate misleading information and use hostile, threatening, or negative communication styles, whether verbally or nonverbally. This escalates the negativity of the environment.

When Park and Song (2006) studied the communication barriers between older patients and nurses, they determined that "understanding the other party's perception of barriers should be considered the first step to solving communication problems, since satisfactory communication is impossible with an inadequate understanding of the perceptions of the other party" (para. 6). Generally, members of competitive work groups are not concerned with the perceptions of the other group members.

Competition, instead of cooperation, can move the focus from the group goals to individual differences, which can ultimately destroy the group. Cooperation fosters effective and open communication.

*Differences between one-way and two-way communication.*

In one-way communication, group members are passive and a chairperson passes along instructions to committee chairpersons; in two-way communication, a reciprocal process exists in which the chairperson and the group members exchange information (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). Two-way communication "encourages open and candid member interaction, distributed participation and leadership, consensual decision making, and other elements of group effectiveness" (Johnson & Johnson, p. 157). There are times when one-way communication is

necessary, such as giving a new Human Resources policy to a department, but two-way communication fosters more cooperation, feedback, and problem solving among group members.

*The importance of communication channels.*

Group members can send and receive communication in several ways, depending on the type of message they are sending or factors of time and distance. Some of these communication channels are more effective than others, according to the situation.

Normally, face to face (FTF) communication is the most direct method of ensuring that the message is received and interpreted correctly. The sender has direct verbal and visual cues of the receiver's interpretation and understanding of the message. Body language, physical distance, and other nonverbal communication can be used by both the sender and the receiver. If the nonverbal communication is received negatively or does not correspond to the verbal message, the receiver can misinterpret the message or shut down. With so many virtual and telecommuting work groups, FTF communication is not always possible.

Written communication in the form of electronic mail (e-mail) is an alternative to FTF communication because it is asynchronous. E-mail provides a quick and efficient way to communicate large or detailed pieces of information to a group member or to the entire group. A downside is that there is no tone in e-mail, so intent can be misconstrued and miscommunication can occur. There is appropriate e-mail etiquette that group members should follow, such as not writing in all caps and not copying every group member on e-mails unnecessarily.

Instant messenger is another written form of communication. It is an excellent way to clarify information or get a specific piece of information to someone very quickly, whether they are far away or in the same building. Instant messenger allows group members to communicate back and forth in real time, which can often feel like a face to face conversation. If the group

members know each other well, the loss of tone and nonverbal communication does not negatively affect the communication.

With e-mail and instant messenger, group members do not see each other, so perceptions of age, gender, race, and personal characteristics are not evident as they are in FTF communication (Koch, Mueller, Kruse, & Zumbach, 2005). This can be a benefit, because it allows people to focus on the message instead of the person who is sending or receiving it. One study involving sales people indicated that nonverbal communication accounts for up to 70 percent of all interpersonal communication (Wood, 2006). Therefore, the message itself has more impact and must be clear, because there is no nonverbal communication to accompany it.

Like e-mail and instant messenger, the telephone is a form of communication that is not impeded by group members who are in different locations, and using the phone allows group members to communicate tone. The downside of using the phone is that nonverbal communication is not transmitted, except for silence. Face to face is still the only method of communication that encompasses verbal, as well as all nonverbal, communication.

#### *Fostering Effective Communication: A Few Strategies*

There are many potential barriers to communicating effectively, but there are also simple and straightforward methods of promoting open and clear communication between work group members.

Managers need to select the right group members based on what they bring to the team in addition to their skill sets. Democratic leaders along with two-way communication can foster openness and candid dialogue within a work group. Creating a friendly environment and using the correct seating arrangements can also foster communication. Diverse group members can add different perspectives to the group, but possible cultural communication differences should be

addressed early in the process, perhaps in the form of diversity training for group members. Group members must determine the appropriate communication channels to use with each interaction. Developing trust can also lead to successful communication.

In order to determine the barriers to communication between nurses and older patients, Park and Song (2006) created a Communication-barrier questionnaire. A formal questionnaire or interview might uncover communication problems or misunderstandings between group members to keep these issues from escalating.

Confident group members can create a harmonious environment that can enhance communication. Studies show that the way people perceive themselves and others is reflected in their interpersonal communication skills, and people who are unable to communicate effectively often suffer from low self-esteem and depression (Guerrero & Jones, 2005). Leaders should consider this when selecting group members, and possibly assist with esteem building activities for group members if needed.

These are just a few strategies for creating a harmonious group environment that can foster effective communication. The potential strategies are as numerous as the potential barriers.

### Discussion

A lack of effective communication can alter the success of a group and discourage them from achieving their goals. Miscommunication can escalate into conflict if not addressed early. Many different factors contribute to the overall effectiveness of communication within a group, and therefore, the effectiveness of the group itself. Work groups must learn to trust each other, create a cooperative atmosphere, select the appropriate methods of communication, and use the most effective communication channels. Otherwise, these elements can become some of the barriers that will hinder successful communication.

Only a few of the barriers that can impede effective communication are analyzed in this paper. The implication for further research is far reaching, since there are so many factors and potential barriers involved in the communication process. Differences in cultural and gender communication, nonverbal communication, biases based on personal characteristics such as age or weight, power structures, hidden agendas, group member roles and norms, and the style of the leader are examples of the other potential barriers that can affect communication.

Groups exist to complete their goals. Learning to communicate effectively in groups can make the difference between a group that is cooperative and can achieve its goals and a group that is ineffective and focuses on the differences between group members instead of their common goals. It is essential to the success of the business that managers and group members break through their communication barriers in order to build cooperative work groups.

## References

- Colvin, G. Why dream teams fail. (2006, June 12). *Fortune*, 153, 87-92. Retrieved July 14, 2006, from the Business Source Premier database.
- Guerrero, L., & Jones, S. (2005). Differences in conversational skills as a function of attachment style: A follow-up study. *Communication Quarterly*, 53.3, 305-322. Retrieved July 16, 2006, from the InfoTrac database.
- Johnson, D., & Johnson, F. (2006). *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Koch, S., Mueller, B., Kruse, L., & Zumbach, J. (2005). Constructing gender in chat groups. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 53, 1-2, 29-42. Retrieved July 16, 2006, from the InfoTrac database.
- McShane, S., & Von Glinow, M. (2005). *Organizational Behavior: Emerging Realities for the Workplace Revolution*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Park, E., & Song, M. (2006). Communication barriers perceived by older patients and nurses. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 42.2, 159. Retrieved July 16, 2006, from the InfoTrac database.
- Wood, J.A. (2006). NLP revisited: Nonverbal communication and signals of trustworthiness. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 26.2, 197-198. Retrieved July 16, 2006, from the InfoTrac database.