Training and Team Communication in the Workplace Diaspora

Wayne Turmel, President www.greatwebmeetings.com

Two Managers In The Modern Workplace

Nic McClean is a modern manager. Based in New Zealand, he works for Cerebos Gregg's ,a food company in New Zealand and Australia, managed from Singapore and majority owned by a Japanese company. He has a team of spread out from Auckland to Amsterdam. Travel budgets are tight, but the need for the team to make informed decisions and function as a cohesive unit has never been more urgent.

There are more mundane problems as well. "Time zones are an issue being based in NZ because many of our European suppliers are home in bed at both ends of our working day" he say.

Bill Gallagher works for Portico Systems in Bluebell, PA. He manages a team of programmers and quality control folks in multiple locations, primarily in the US and India. For a long time he's felt team performance is not what it should be because of poor communication and maybe more importantly, no team cohesion. Attempts to get the team together to establish those connections are non-starters because of high travel costs and project time constraints.

What these managers are learning, is that many of the tried and true management practices of the past no longer directly apply to the way we work in the 21st Century, and their companies are struggling to find ways to respond. Many of them are finding their way through the maze of technology, trying to get to the reward: team effectiveness and efficiency.

The Workplace Diaspora

While Bill and Nic's cases might seem extreme, they're not all that unusual. We hear about the world being "flatter" and "24-7" but what does that really mean? The implications affect workers nearly every day in ways large and small:

- WebEx, the world's best known web conferencing platform estimates that they hold 50,000 web meetings a day, 7 days a week and has over 2 Million subscribers
- According to Citrix, 23% of America's white-collar workers work at least one day a week from a location other than their office, and 60% would like the option
- Research in the UK suggests that at any time, nearly a third of the desks in offices in the City of London are empty, because people are working from home, visiting branch offices of their company or out on customer sites
- By some estimates, 70% of middle managers around the world have at least one direct report who doesn't work in the same office or general location they do. The old concept of "management by walking around" doesn't apply when, as one manager put it, "It's a long walk to Mumbai"
- According to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) companies in the US spend about $1,425 US per employee for training. With a larger percentage of that budget threatened by travel and lost opportunity costs, the alternative is to blow out travel budgets or reduce the amount of training per employee. No wonder then that alternatives such as on-line

learning and synchronous web-based training (webinars, online coaching) are becoming more popular.

For the first time, managers are facing new challenges, with little in the way of reliable "best practices" to look to for guidance. How do individual managers and their companies manage this workplace diaspora while maintaining their focus on human relationships, training and performance?

Many managers and their companies are doing the best they can on an ad hoc basis. Bill reports that "We had to look at ways to proxy communication. Increasing the overall volume of email helped a bit- we mandated daily and weekly status reports from each team member, for one thing- but we also increased the frequency of our phone conversations and started using collaboration tools like Skype and Mitel. Seeing one of your team members that you never met smiling at you over their webcam and talking about their work face-to face is a great way to build trust and accountability".

Low-cost (and even free tools) like Skype are one way managers are stepping up to find innovative solutions. Bill and Nic's experiences are not unique, and they both point to something that can complicate cross continental training and communication efforts- the human factor.

Technology is the Answer-Right?

There is a tendency in business to believe that the answer to all ills is to be found in IT solutions. Classroom training can be replaced by online solutions. People don't have to get together- webmeetings (also known as web conferencing. For our purposes we'll assume they're the same thing) conference calls, email and Instant Messaging can have people connect just as well without having to get them on an airplane or wasting time in traffic. Just raise the IT budget and get out of the way.

It's not that easy, says Bill Gallagher. ""We had several challenges implementing a new virtual team located on the other side of the globe. The first thing we realized is that you can't take the same approach with your remote team members than with your co-located teams. The lack of face-to-face interaction just does not lend itself to growing a team that trusts each other and is willing to go the extra mile".

Communication is not simply the flow of data- and Information Technology does that exceptionally well- it's a complicated process of interpretation that involves the "3 V"s (verbal, vocal and visual information).

Nic explains some of the challenges he faced in trying to work with his team."Conference calls and video conferences work fine when you are simply discussing something but many of our internal meetings need shared data (working on sales forecasts) or shared screen (Systems training or presentations) or even just shared meeting minutes. Emailing updates every 10 minutes is just painful and always running behind real time."

Frustration, lack of trust, and other all-too-human emotional complications can take something that looks simple on the surface and render it useless. Worse, it can build resentment and frustration to a point where information still flows through the pipe, there just may be nothing to communicate.

Not only that, but the competing needs of the Business, IT and the various departments can create logjams and poor decisions that impact the effectiveness of communication in the long run.

Let's start with the human component and bring it down to the company or implementation level.

The Richness To Scope Ratio and Why It Matters

When it comes to quality of communication, a simple model will show why technology plays such an important role. According to the researcher Dr. Bettina Buechel[1], all communication is a balance of "Richness" (the multiple real-time ways we gather and interpret communication) and "Scope" (how quickly, consistently and widely a message can be disseminated).

A face-to-face meeting between two people is incredibly "rich"- as two people speak you get the undivided attention of the listener, you both can hear not only the words used, but the tone of voice, rate of speech, body language and other non-verbal communication that adds context. Because there are only two of you, the conversation happens in real time- you can interrupt, ask clarifying questions and connect on a human level. The message is as clear and undiluted as possible. Rich, indeed.

On the other hand, a manager would be hard pressed to have a face to face meeting every time with every employee- especially if they are separated by continents. How do you address that challenge? There are plenty of tools that help increase "scope".

Email, for example allows you to send thousands of people anywhere in the world the same message at the same time. That's the good news.

As anyone who has ever spent two days explaining what they *really meant* when they sent an email because of the lack of interactivity and context ("I was just kidding" being only one source
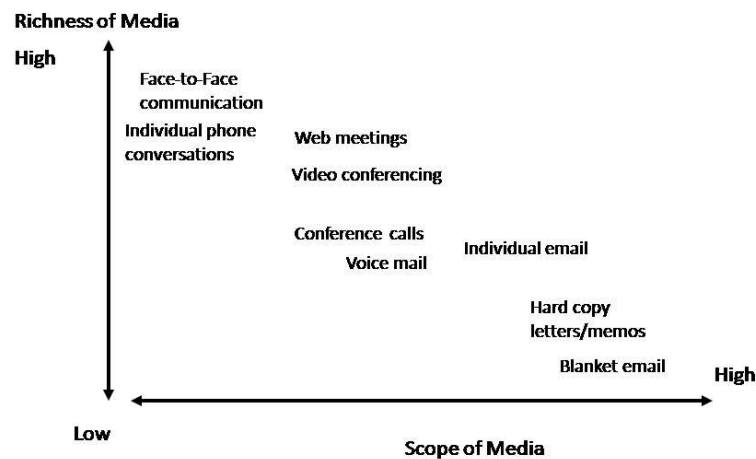
---

[1] Bettina Buechel: "Using Communication Technology", 2001 (Palgrave Press)

of confusion), these messages become less rich as scope increases. Misunderstandings will inevitably arise without the opportunity to question, clarify and get answers to questions quickly.

Bill Gallagher has experienced this. "Our normal method of communicating with remote employees is email. We found that this didn't scale very well. It works in some cases, but it's only one piece of the whole virtual team puzzle".

If we think about all the ways companies can communicate over distance, the different tools fall like this on the Richness vs. Scope matrix:

Richness v Scope

Richness of Media

High

- Face-to-Face communication
- Individual phone conversations
- Web meetings
- Video conferencing
- Conference calls
- Voice mail
- Individual email
- Hard copy letters/memos
- Blanket email   **High**

Low

Scope of Media

Bettina Buechel :

Why should companies take this scale into account when planning to overcome distance in the workplace?

Consider the impact of choosing the wrong tool in a few specific instances.

Team cohesion and communication

Nic and Bill have discovered that communication tools by themselves don't overcome the human issues that naturally arise during the course of work.

Nic knows this very well from his experience with the team at Cerebos. "Phone and video conferences are now common, but have the same challenges. Training remotely can work if you're fine tuning skilled users, but with newcomers it can be slow and painful."

When information is only one-way, scope increases but richness decreases. Some of the impacts include:

- Trust diminishes as richness decreases. This can create long-term problems in communication and even result in project cost overruns and team turnover

- Rework increases as the opportunities for confirming assumptions and asking questions decreases

- Research at DePaul University in Chicago[2] shows that when virtual-only tools are used, there is a slight increase in "negative behaviors" such as lying, omitting important behavior and even bullying- behaviors normally held in check by the reality of human interaction. If you don't have to look someone in the eye and receive rich feedback, there are fewer checks on these bad behaviors

Training and choosing the right tools

One area where this richness vs. scope discussion really hits home is when the wrong tool is chosen to deliver training.

Remember that there are several reasons companies train their employees:

- To ensure tasks are done correctly

- To help all employees perform at least to minimal acceptable standards

- To ensure consistency of approach across the organization- people will do the same task the same way

What companies call training covers a wide spectrum of subjects, from simple data points ("this is the form you use for expenses") to higher level, complex processes. Without going into Performance Improvement theory, there are three areas training tries to address: knowledge (do they know what to do), skill (can they do it) and attitude (if they know how, why aren't they doing it?)

---

[2] Alice Stuhlmacher and Maryalice Citera: "Hostile Behavior and Profit in Virtual Negotiation: a Meta-Analysis" "Journal of Business and Psychology" 2005

In order to use the right approach for the right challenge, the richness vs. scope matrix comes into play.

Getting people together in the classroom to show them a new form to use (a knowledge problem) is overkill- simple transfer of new data doesn't need to be that rich, and it can be accomplished by email or asynchronous, web-based training that can be accessed any time.

Conversely, anyone who has tried to get a team to use a new software application knows that the problem is complex. There are knowledge issues (what is the tool and how does it work?) as well as skill problems (knowing how it works is different from being able to actually input data in an efficient manner) and attitude challenges (the old system worked just fine, why change what isn't broken?).

Addressing skill and attitude issues is impossible without rich communication that allows you to assess skills, knowledge and attitude, address different learning styles and test whether the new skill has actually been learned. In a classroom you can tell when someone has a glazed, distracted look. Online, that person could be answering email. How do you know?

Choosing the right tool and communication method is critical to avoid wasting time and precious resources. After all, putting one hundred people on a webmeeting and making them passively watch a demonstration is a waste of everyone's time if at the end they can't actually *use the program* properly. Your team will spend more time in re-training and helpdesk support than you saved on the training.

In the case of application training, while the temptation is to use something with wide scope and less richness (prerecorded web-based training or webmeetings with multiple participants and a one-way delivery of information), an old-fashioned training approach would dictate small groups with application sharing and a chance for people to actually use the tool and demonstrate they have learned how to use it. In a web-enabled world this might mean small online groups, using tools like application sharing, chat and other tools. It would take longer to accomplish your goals, but the result will be people actually knowing how to use the application.

An initial investment of time and resources will mean fewer panicky calls to the help desk and faster ramp-up to actually use of the tool your company has invested so much money in.

Bill and Nic's solutions

Because both these managers have made careers of being cost-conscious and proactive they took the initial steps themselves.

Bill Gallagher uses the tools at Portico's disposal (email, IM and telephone) and added free services such as Skype and Mitel which used Voice Over IP (VOIP) and cheap web cameras. By making smart decisions about which tool to use when, and choosing the right balance of richness and scope, he's improved the mood of this team as well as their productivity.

"If there was one word that summarizes what is working for us now, it would be 'overcommunication'," he says. As much as our schedules allow, we are in touch with our remote team members. We're always forwarding email, Skyping, talking on conference calls and generally interacting with each other as much as we can. It's not always effective, but we've found that one of the ways to build trust with someone on the other side of the world is to increase the frequency of communication. It's not always about work, either; I love to ask someone on the other end of a Skype call what the weather is like where they are, what time it is there and how their weekend went". These human connections, enhanced by technology, pay dividends for Portico Systems.

Nic has taken a different approach. He uses the low-cost webmeeting platform, Dimdim, to hold web meetings for small issues that require interaction and rich communication but aren't worth incurring huge travel and time costs. It allows him to share information, use webcams and voice and encourage collaboration using flash video, meaning no plug ins or other software to install- a real bugbear for many companies. While it is still early days, the results are encouraging and senior management is following events closely.

The role of the company

Individual managers like Bill and Nic are taking the initiative where they can. At Portico Systems, Bill says, "Executive Management doesn't want to hear excuses. They don't want to hear about challenges. They want solutions and on-time results. It was up to us front-line managers to come up with an engagement strategy that worked and that got those results. Kudos to them for believing in us and giving us the tools and the time we needed to create that strategy; we couldn't have done it without their support".

It's not always that simple, though. The fact that many of these tools require input or approval from Senior Management with budget responsibility, IT, and other departments means a holistic approach is required.

Nic encountered some resistance from the IT department because of security concerns. "IT guys are very security and stability conscious and were not at all keen on the internet based solutions having access to internal data or third parties having access into a hole in our firewall. Their preference is to have an application inside the firewall which has functionality (sharing of

files/desktops) restricted to internal meetings. "Without being able to hitch this project onto the bigger one, it would have been a hard struggle to get it approved. You have to show ROI- for example 10 trips from Auckland to Sydney at $1,000 a trip. This is much easier than trying to quantify 'how much improvement in the forecast was due to remote teams being able to see the numbers and what was the profit'".

Because there are legitimate concerns from many departments, it's important that companies develop a communication technology strategy. Some of the things they need to consider:

- What are the specific communication challenges your company faces?

- What tools do you already have in your organization to address those challenges?

- What is the cost of not implementing these solutions (lost opportunities, project delays)?

- What training challenges do companies face and where do they fall on the richness vs. scope matrix?

Every part of the organization needs to be involved in these discussions and understand the needs of the other parts. One well-known U.S. bank's international training initiatives are currently stalled because the IT department purchased a solution that won't do what the training department needs it to do- and they are stalled over whether to "make do with what they have" or to find a new solution. Meanwhile tens of thousands of dollars of process and application training is delayed. This situation is not unusual.

Once an organization identifies the tools necessary to meet their communication needs, there is one last question to be addressed: how confident are you that the people (managers, trainers, subject matter experts, sales people) who will use these tools are comfortable with them and fluent in their use? What plans are in place for the training of managers in what will be a core competency in the 21st Century.

Investment in a robust webmeeting platform like WebEx or LiveMeeting is not going to reap returns if people are uncomfortable using it. Do time-strapped managers use email by default without considering the long term implications of non-rich communication? Do managers insist on breaking the budget because of a preference for one tool over another?

While proactive managers like Bill and Nic are great role models, many managers are unfamiliar with the technology or even which tool to use for which challenge. Whether it's technophobia or just unfamiliarity, without integrating these tools with management training and following

proven best practices they will not achieve the cost and time efficiencies that can make them such a powerful tool to companies.

About Wayne Turmel and Greatwebmeetings.com

Wayne Turmel is president of one of the world's premiere web presentation skills training and consulting companies, www.greatwebmeetings.com. They take a skills-based approach to teaching the presentation, facilitation and sales skills necessary to use these 21st century tools to their fullest, regardless of which platform you use. Wayne is also a respected author in the training field and host of one of the world's most successful management podcasts, "The Cranky Middle Manager Show".

He can be reached at wturmel@greatwebmeetings.com +1 630 347 8369.