

(Written Assignment – 5 points)

Instructions: Post your answers and responses to the appropriate discussion board. **Do not use file attachments.** See the syllabus for additional instructions. Be prepared to discuss this assignment in class.

1. Discuss the implications for a project manager of scenario A: onsite Maria and scenario B: virtual Maria in chapter 3 of *A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams*.
2. Respond to another student's post.

Your answers and response should be thorough, carefully thought out, and properly edited. They will be graded on content, delivery, and adherence to instructions. The response to another student is worth 1 point out of 5.

CHAPTER 3

Context Communication: Definitions and Challenges

Effective communication is the first of the four elements of successful virtual team performance. When interacting with others, the more we can communicate our context, the greater the connection and, therefore, the greater the chance of achieving the objectives that we set out to accomplish.

The virtual workplace has transformed the business landscape across the globe in many positive ways, but it has also altered the essence of the human connection. As you know firsthand, connections that occur during face-to-face exchanges become more elusive when we lose close proximity with others.

Why is it important to foster the human connection in the virtual world? It seems obvious that when team members share a bond they work more productively. In the long run, building good relationships enables more effective team performance and reduces situations that are dominated by conflict. These key benefits directly impact work product and the organization's key deliverables.

The human connection also allows a richer path of information exchange through what I call *Context Communication*. This allows virtual team members to understand the setting that their teammates are working in and to find the best approach to collaboration. When context is missing, virtual teams are forced to make a greater effort to maintain the

human connection, which in turn leads to new behaviors and ways of communicating.

Let's look at two different scenarios to gain an understanding of how the multiple layers of Context Communication work and their important implications for teamwork.

Scenario A: On-Site Maria

Meet Maria, a Boston-based software consultant who works at Results Software Ltd., a firm specializing in enterprise media solutions. These days she spends much of her time running to and from meetings with her largest client, Xingo Media, an e-business publisher that develops databases for the industrial marketplace. A quick glance at her workspace shows a desk piled with paperwork (in spite of a laptop and second computer screen) and a phone that continually rings. Today is the final deadline for the deployment of Xingo's e-collaboration website, a multistage project that Maria has worked the past year to complete. Unfortunately, technical issues arise at the last minute and Maria finds herself putting out fires, tracking down their causes, and locating knowledgeable experts to fix these last-minute problems.

You know Maria because both of you have worked at Results Software headquarters in Boston for almost five years, sometimes collaborating on the same projects because she is the point person on XLB Standards. Today, at 10:00 a.m. EST, you sent her an e-mail about the launch of XLB in several satellite offices of your client, Sea-Stars Media. You need her input for tomorrow's meeting with Sea-Star's senior executives about the rollout. As she runs past you in the hallway, Maria looks stressed out. She's deep in conversation on her hands-free phone, with hot coffee in one hand, an overstuffed file in the other. Hopefully, she won't spill the coffee as she goes about her business. There's worry in her voice and you can't help but feel concerned about her deadlines.

You know from hallway chats and from the general atmosphere in the office about the demands of the Xingo Media project. Although it does not directly affect you, almost every department at Results has been involved in it at some point. Maria's promotion is dependent on the successful completion of Xingo, and you are excited that all her

hard work will finally pay off. You want to find the best approach to getting Maria's timely input without distracting her from an important deadline. She walks into her office at 4:45 p.m., and you know this is her last opportunity to catch up at her desk because she always leaves at 5:00 p.m. sharp to pick up her nine-year-old twin sons from the local after-school program that ends at 5:30 p.m. Displayed throughout her office are family photos of her sons at various ages; you have met the boys and are aware of her daily routine.

If you didn't know Maria's situation so well, you might be worried about the lack of response to your e-mail; instead, you know that Maria diligently logs in remotely from home to catch up on e-mail once her children are settled after 7:00 p.m., so you are not concerned. You know she is committed to Results Software, works hard, takes on a large workload, but can always be relied on to help her teammates. Therefore, her 7:15 p.m. e-mail stating that your request will be ready by 9:30 a.m. tomorrow is no surprise.

Result: Because of your observations and background knowledge, you are not surprised that you didn't receive Maria's status update to your 10:00 a.m. e-mail until 7:15 p.m. that day, despite its "urgent" status. In fact, you could have predicted this outcome when you sent your e-mail.

Now let's look at this same situation from another vantage point—minus the visual cues, background information, personal history, shared lingo, and common understanding that you and Maria have.

Scenario B: Virtual Maria

You are a consultant with Results Software Ltd., working in the San Francisco office, so you have neither met nor spoken with Maria, who also has five years' tenure with the company. You are working on the launch of XLB for Sea-Stars Media in several of its satellite offices and were told to contact Maria today by a colleague who recommended her as the company expert on XLB Standards. So, this morning, at 10:00 a.m. EST, you e-mailed her about the launch, stating that you need her response for tomorrow's meeting with senior executives about the rollout. Because this simple request was urgent, you expected

Maria to complete it within fifteen minutes. You sent your request by 7:00 a.m. PST, to make sure it was on Maria's radar early that morning on the East Coast. By noon EST, you place a follow-up call about the e-mail. No answer. You leave a voice mail hoping that she will return the call today. By 4:00 p.m. EST, you question if Maria is still with Results Software. If she is, you wonder if perhaps an emergency arose that prevented her from responding to your request.

It is now 5:00 p.m. EST, the end of your business day, and she never answered your e-mail. Regrettably, you conclude that she will not do so today and decide on a backup plan. You do not assume that she will work beyond standard business hours.

Result: At 7:15 p.m. EST, Maria responds to your e-mail. However, by this time you dropped other work commitments and skipped a run-through of tomorrow's meeting in order to spend two hours working on a backup plan. Now, you have to discard the extra work you did and are perplexed by Maria's last-minute but welcome expertise.

The Difference?

What was the difference between scenario A and scenario B? Did Maria do anything differently? What do you know about Maria and her situation in scenario A that was not verbally communicated? Do you have the same information in scenario B? What happened because of this lack of information? What does XLB mean? Without context information you may not know what this acronym represents. If you were not familiar with Maria's personal life, what assumptions might you make when she does not respond during the business day? Without knowing her circumstances you might attribute her silence to a poor work ethic. Did she stay home—and if so, why didn't she check e-mails from there? Is she at her office? Is she even in this country or time zone? Is her phone working? Is she a responsible employee committed to the company? Is she competent, or simply overwhelmed? Who is Maria?

Scenario A presents a deep reservoir of background information about Maria, including her family, workload issues, schedule, work habits, personal characteristics, career goals, and hot spots in her current

workday. You know her moods, concerns, caffeine levels, and more. That is a lot of information, and it helps you understand how to maintain a good working relationship. When you are aware of the other projects a team member juggles along with yours and can observe that person running to and from meetings, you are able to gauge the timing of a response. With background information it is easier to predict behavior, manage your own expectations, choose the best approach, and in general, maintain a good working relationship.

The main difference between scenario A and scenario B is *Context Communication*. In the first scenario, you know the many reasons Maria has not responded. Context had been communicated not through words, but through visual cues and shared history. Without being explicitly told, you knew when to expect a response from Maria.

What Is Context Communication?

As you can see from Maria's example, there are many different types of cues that provide information, and these layers of observable cues create context, or a sense of place. Context Communication is the framework within which we connect the dots so that they make sense. Working in the same office as our teammates allows us to observe behaviors, actions, and surroundings, creating background information from which we infer a heightened understanding of their situation. Simply put, a shared context for understanding is a given for on-site teams, and no effort is required to connect the dots because when you can see, hear, and sense cues, the dots connect themselves.

Context Communication means that team members working in close proximity can quickly assess the cues and therefore understand the context in which certain behaviors take place. Observations about another person's verbal tone, body language, and other visual cues create the context that helps us understand each other, the task at hand, and the overall work situation. Informal hallway or watercooler chats that are common with on-site teams provide a natural way to conduct casual conversations, build personal relationships, and learn additional context, some of which you store in the back of your mind for future situations.

Context Communication is achieved in three ways:

1. *Environmental Cues.* Visual, audio, and physical cues provide information about your physical surroundings, your schedule, and your workload.
2. *The Medium.* The format used for communication, such as e-mail, voice, videoconferencing, or face-to-face interactions, determines the richness of information that is communicated.
3. *Relationships.* Knowledge of teammates' personalities, career goals, friendships, alliances, and moods provides cues about work behaviors.

Let's break down the rich, multilayered information about Maria that was available in scenario A into the three types of Context Communication.

Environmental Cues

The first type of Context Communication eroded in a virtual setting is environment. The most immediate cues lost are those we take for granted in a shared office environment, such as the physical condition of the workspace, as well as visual and audio cues we get from having people around us. Context Communication cues diminish with distance, and I refer to them as *diminished cues* of the virtual environment. Virtual coworkers don't know if you are sitting at your desk, attending a meeting, or away for a particular reason. They can't see Maria running between meetings. They can't hear the phone ringing or overhear hallway chatter such as, "Did you hear about the Xingo deadline today?" When on the phone with a virtual teammate, it is not possible to know if she is doing something else, such as typing an e-mail or texting. Imagine if you couldn't hear Maria's phone continually ring (the implication being that there are many demands for her time). Imagine not knowing that a phone call might not be the best way to reach her. Unless Maria has communicated the context of her busy day, which is filled with meetings away from the office, and that she usually isn't available by phone, you may be at a loss.

There are limits to the available information about team members in the virtual space. These limits point to the three challenges faced by virtual teams due to the constraints of environmental Context Communication.

Environmental Challenge 1: Team Members' Awareness of Tasks and Availability

The on-site scenario provided evidence of Maria's busy schedule. An empty office indicated that she was at a meeting and probably couldn't call or e-mail immediately. You saw stacks of papers at her workstation, which implied a busy workday. You heard her on the phone and could see that she placed someone on hold. With so much going on you might conclude that calling might not be the best way to engage her. Next, she raced past you, indicating that she was pressed for time. Later, she returned to her office—but you knew that didn't mean she was available. At that point, you already had enough information to assess the situation, but the cues kept adding to your understanding. Certainly you conclude that Maria is not slacking off.

In addition to visual cues, you knew from past conversations that Maria spent an entire year working on a large project that was due today. You may have overheard conversations about this key project in the hallway or chatted with coworkers at lunch. Lastly, the company's intranet includes a calendar listing every current project by consultant and deadline, which is continually updated and accessed by everyone. As you can see, there are many sources of information in a nonvirtual workplace that provide rich information about Maria.

The shared calendar is more important virtually than in the on-site world because it becomes one of your few sources of context to learn about Maria's availability. However, even this calendar does not indicate interruptions and unplanned situations. Unless virtual Maria explicitly tells you about the endless stream of interruptions, you would not infer it from her calendar. Nor would you know if virtual Maria had spilled her coffee on her expensive suit and had to go to the dry cleaners next door to avoid ruining it.

Here are some practical tips to help you communicate context around tasks and availability challenges:

- Use group discussions and shared documents to facilitate awareness of team members' additional projects, tasks, and workload. You can add information about a team member while discussing a project. For example, you may add something like "Jason has been swamped with ABC project, so you might have to get your request in early."
- Share meeting calendars with teammates and keep the calendar up-to-date, even with last-minute additions.
- E-mail the team (and other stakeholders) if an unexpected situation makes you unavailable. You can also create standard procedures for planned situations, such as vacations, notifications, or extended trips, as well as for emergencies, to enable team members to communicate schedules and unforeseen interruptions (personal or work-related) within minutes.
- Ensure everyone briefly comments on what is going on in their world via a round-robin at the beginning of meetings. Giving colleagues an opportunity to talk about their issues is one way to create a habit of communicating context.
- Model the behavior that you want to see in others. Share social and personal information, with a rich exchange about your context, and encourage others to do the same.

Environmental Challenge 2: Lost Riders

How can you tell if someone is really working? When a team member continually pushes back deadlines, how would you know if the reasons are valid? How long does it take to detect if someone is not fulfilling her responsibilities in a virtual environment? What do you do if someone stops responding to your e-mails and phone calls, and you cannot stop by her desk? Is this team member lost, missing, or just avoiding you?

Many clients tell me that the virtual environment makes it easier for team members to hide. Some people may take advantage of the lack of daily oversight; they may get "lost" or go missing. The first clue is that deadlines are continually pushed back, and then deliverables aren't produced for days, weeks, or months. The critical time to notice situations that could lead to potential issues is during the early phase of a

new project or when a new member joins the team. Also, by keeping time lines for deliverables short in the early phases, it is easier to catch problems. In fact, some clients find that short time lines work best throughout the entire life cycle of the project.

Identifying Lost Riders

- The individual often pushes back on deadlines, and you lack the information to verify the validity of the push-back.
- There's a time lag in response to e-mails and phone calls.
- The team member doesn't contribute work product or update reports although claims to be in meetings or on the phone most of the day working on your project.
- In extreme cases, a team member has seemingly stopped responding to requests.

Tips for Handling Lost Riders

- Have short-term goals and deliverables so that you can identify issues early.
- Bring issues to light as soon as you discover them. Discuss them with the team members involved.
- Come up with techniques to deal with people who are not responding. You can prevent this behavior by creating team Rules of the Road during the Team Setup stage, as discussed in Chapter 2. If team rules are violated, colleagues can bring up these issues as soon as they occur.
- Develop availability standards. Have team members state their working hours and inform others how often they check their voice mail, e-mail, and interoffice mail. And establish a standard for how quickly to respond to each mode of communication. You can publish availability standards on the team's website or in a shared system. An added advantage of availability standards is that they act as a foundation for establishing trust.
- Have a clear performance plan, including escalation measures, for the team. Follow through when someone becomes unresponsive or unproductive.

Be careful in labeling someone a Lost Rider. Just because someone doesn't speak up during conference calls doesn't mean she is a Lost Rider. Keep in mind that personality, hidden conflict differences, expectations about the agenda or call procedures, or cross-cultural differences are all factors that may prevent a team member from speaking up.

Environmental Challenge 3: Multitasking

One of the biggest complaints I hear regularly involves people multitasking and not truly listening. In many ways, this is the new "normal" in the business world. People often work on more than one task while conducting business calls. I met one manager who told me, "When you are in a conference room, you can see what people are doing and know if they stay engaged. On a virtual team, everyone is doing several things at once. I was expecting communication to be smoother and better understood, but I now realize that not everyone was fully participating."

Her comment made me consider the value of multitasking in the virtual environment. People appear to be listening during calls, but are they? Despite various data tools that capture caller activity during the virtual interaction, how can you tell if your virtual teammates are really listening?

Without physical (environmental) context, you can't see if your teammates are concentrating. When team members are overworked and short on time, they may feel freer to perform other tasks, like responding to e-mails, while participating on a group call. Nowadays, some online tools enable managers to see if someone is clicking on other screens or staying with the screen under discussion. The level of engagement can now be measured, and I've talked to several managers who can determine the percentage of team members actively engaged during a call. Many interviews conducted for this book noted that (1) teammates often multitask and (2) virtual managers find this behavior frustrating.

Identifying Excessive Multitasking

- The team member sounds preoccupied or has a delayed response while on a conference call.

- Background sounds are audible, which may result from keystrokes, driving in a car, or running an errand while discussing a project.
- The team member seems distracted, lost in the flow of the conversation, or asks you to repeat yourself several times. This could mean that he “checked out” of the meeting or has a bad phone connection. It could also denote cross-cultural issues, with that individual having difficulty understanding your words.
- You notice an e-mail sent from a fellow participant during a phone conference; however, that means that you too are multitasking!

Multitasking: Good, Bad, or Necessary?

A manager I recently coached said that he does not like the word *multitasking* because it has a bad connotation. He prefers to say that he “rapidly refocuses” when he handles multiple communications simultaneously. He may be an exception, or he may exemplify the new generation whose digital environment has ongoing distractions. Is that good or bad? Perhaps it is a necessary response today and going forward.

Tips for Avoiding Excessive Multitasking

- Set priorities around your team objectives to help people focus on the two or three main ones.
- Write a Team Code that details acceptable behaviors associated with multitasking, such as:
 - Running errands during work hours.
 - Turning off cell phone ringer/buzzer, e-mail notification, and MP3 players and tuning in during calls.
 - Confronting or reminding team members who excessively multitask.

- Agreeing on when to use the “mute” button during phone conferences.
 - Agreeing that certain multitasking behavior is acceptable, provided that it is done within reason. One virtual manager working for a semiconductor chip company agreed with her team that during long meetings people could work on their laptops while listening. They were not forced to participate unless something was relevant to their part of the project.
- Realize that multitasking is common in the virtual environment and help team members to prioritize and become fully present while on your calls by creating more urgency around deliverables.
 - Ensure that a communication system exists to alert everyone when certain team members are participating in a scheduled conference call and therefore are unavailable to quickly respond to e-mails.
 - Check in with teammates regularly by asking questions; for example, “How is it going on project X?” Also, get them involved in the dialogue during the call.
 - Focus on adding value rather than adding volume. Identify activities that will truly add value to what is important and do them.
 - Pay attention to what you can get done now.

The Medium

Medium is the second type of Context Communication; it is the format used to communicate with virtual members. Medium determines the richness of information that is received, with e-mail, phone, and videoconference the most common means of communication. But there are other ways for virtual workers to communicate, too, including using instant messaging and chat programs, whiteboards, discussion boards, file sharing, web sharing, text messages on mobile devices, and social media websites. Should you type an e-mail or send an IM? Leave a voice mail or call back? Is a videoconference better for the topic at