

Clear Communication = Effective Collaboration

Simple, clear communication promotes simple, clear collaboration. That's the advice of Susan Docherty, who leads the U. S. sales, service, and marketing team at General Motors. Especially in the context of a group or team, with multiple points of view being expressed or people jockeying for position (or trying to get out of doing more work), it's important to be clear and to the point. When asked for advice about how to make collaboration effective, Docherty said,

Whether you have a really small team or a really big team, communication needs to be at the forefront. It needs to be simple. It needs to be consistent. And even when you're tired of what the message is, you need to do it again and again and again. Because everybody listens at different levels, and everybody comes to the table with a different perspective and a different

experience. And the same words mean different things to different people.

On some very key things, people need to internalize it, and they need to own it. And when they do, you'll know that you're effective as a leader, because you hear them saying it.³⁷

As Docherty suggests, one way you know your ideas are getting across to others is when you hear your friends or colleagues restating some of your ideas and suggestions. So listen to others to assess whether your ideas have been heard and understood. Whether you're part of a work team at General Motors or collaborating with others for a class project, what's the best way to make sure your ideas are accurately interpreted by others? Remember Susan Docherty's advice: Make messages clear and simple—then repeat as necessary.

but teenagers; increasingly when groups and teams need to collaborate in business and professional settings, especially if team members are not physically close to one another, they connect using technology rather than meeting face-to-face.

A **virtual team** is a team that interacts via a channel other than face-to-face communication. Email, video conferences, and a vast array of technological tools make it possible for us to be psychologically close to someone even if that person lives and works on the other side of the world. Because of the increased costs of travel, many businesses and professional organizations are doing more collaborative work using virtual teams.³⁸ And even if we work in the same building with our colleagues, we may nonetheless connect electronically rather than interacting face-to-face. Yet collaborating in virtual teams seems to have a tipping point. One study found that when virtual teams interacted via electronic channels more than 90 percent of the time, teams were *less* successful in achieving team outcomes.³⁹

Your personal computer, your cell phone, and other technological tools give you the ability to collaborate with other people who are not all in the same place at the same time. To give you an idea of how rapidly worldwide Internet use is increasing, note these statistics: In 2005, over 950 million people used the Internet; that number had grown to over 2 billion people in 2011—and the numbers continue to grow exponentially.⁴⁰

How is electronically-mediated, virtual teamwork different from live, face-to-face conversation? There are four key differences:⁴¹

- **Anonymity:** If you are interacting by text message or email only, you may not always know precisely with whom you are communicating when you receive a message.
- **Physical appearance:** There is typically less emphasis on a person's physical appearance and nonverbal communication online.
- **Distance:** Although we certainly can and do send email messages to people who live and work in the same building, there is typically greater physical distance between people who are communicating online.
- **Time:** You have greater control over the timing and pacing of the messages you send and receive. You can decide, for example, when to retrieve a text or email messages or when to respond to a message you receive. Your interaction with others can be **asynchronous**—which means your messages are out of sync with the time in which you send them; there often is a time delay between when you send and receive a message. Or they can be **synchronous**—the messages are received the moment they are sent.

terms & definitions

Virtual team a team that interacts via a channel other than face-to-face communication but rather uses email, video conferences, or other technological tools.

Asynchronous communication in which there is a time delay between when a message is sent and when it is received.

Synchronous communication which is received and responded to in real time.

As you participate in or lead team meetings, be aware of the general pattern of communication. Are all members participating? Do some people whisper their ideas only to a few and not share with the rest of the group? Is a group deviate monopolizing the conversation or blocking progress? By being observant of interaction patterns, you can help the team enhance cohesiveness and develop appropriate roles to get the work done.

Improving Team Dynamics

Now that you can describe team roles, norms, and networks, you may wonder if there are specific ways to improve team dynamics. One way to clarify roles is to establish clear ground rules about how the team should best operate. Making sure the team has a clear mission statement contributes to good dynamics: Effective teams have a clear, elevating goal. Managing differences in status and power can also help reduce tension. And implementing strategies to enhance team cohesiveness can help teams work together more effectively.

How to Develop Team Ground Rules

Team ground rules are explicit, agreed-on prescriptions for acceptable and appropriate behavior. An effective team takes the time to develop clear rules that will help to organize routine tasks and procedures. Although team norms typically develop without anyone explicitly spelling out what the norm should be, a team may decide to develop more explicit rules to help get the work accomplished. For example, although it may be a norm that meetings usually start on time, a team could decide to establish a ground rule that all meetings will *always* begin on time. There's evidence that teams are more effective if they develop explicit rules that help the team operate efficiently.⁶³ Rules help keep order so that meaningful work can be accomplished. Rules also state what the team or organization values. Honesty, fairness, adherence to schedules, and personal safety are typical values embedded in team ground rules.

How does a team develop ground rules? Soon after the formation of a team, the team leader may facilitate a discussion to establish the ground rules. If a team has no designated leader, any team member can say, "To help us get organized and accomplish our task, let's develop some ground rules." Teams clearly operate better if team members develop their own ground rules rather than having them imposed from "on high." Following are some questions that can help a group develop clear and appropriate ground rules:

- How should we record the results of our meetings?
- Who should set meeting agendas?
- How long should our meetings last?
- Should we have a regular meeting time and place?
- What should a member do if he or she can't attend a meeting?
- Should we make our decisions by majority vote or seek a consensus on every decision?

These questions might result in the following team ground rules:

- Every meeting will begin on time.
- Each team member is expected to attend every meeting.
- Each team member will be prepared for every meeting.
- Only one person will speak at a time.
- We will work together to manage conflict when it arises.
- If we get off the agenda, we will return to the agenda.
- We will make decisions by consensus rather than by simple majority vote.
- Each team member will follow through on individual assignments.
- If someone brings up an important topic that is not on our agenda, we will write it on a sticky note, place it in the "parking lot," and return to it later rather than get off our agenda.

terms & definitions

Team ground rules explicit, agreed-on prescriptions for acceptable and appropriate behavior, which help the team organize routine tasks and procedures.

How to Develop a Team Mission Statement

A **team mission statement** is a concise description of a team's goals or desired outcomes. A clearly worded mission statement helps a team know not only whether it's on task or off task but also when it has completed the task.

A good team mission statement should pass the SMARTS test—it should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound, and should Stretch the team.⁶⁴

- **Specific:** It should clearly describe what the team should accomplish.
- **Measurable:** The team must be able to assess whether the mission was achieved.
- **Attainable:** The mission statement should be realistic given the time and resources of the teams.
- **Relevant:** The mission should be appropriate to what the team has been assigned to do.
- **Time-bound:** Teams should set a deadline or time frame for achieving the mission.
- **Stretch:** The goal should be a bit of a challenge so as to stretch the team.

Here are examples of team mission statements that pass the SMARTS test:

- Our team will make 10 percent more widgets by the end of the month.
- Our team will sell more life insurance policies than any other sales team in our sales area.
- Our team will attract two new businesses to our community, which will result in an increased tax base by the end of the year.

How to Manage Team Status Differences

Status refers to an individual's importance and prestige. Your status in a group influences whom you talk to, who talks to you, and even what you talk about. Although some people underestimate their perceived status and influence in a group, research suggests that you are probably quite aware of your own status level when communicating with others.⁶⁵ Your perceived importance affects both your verbal and your nonverbal messages. Typically, a person with high status

- Talks more than those of lower status.
- Directs comments to other high-status group members.
- Has more influence on the decisions the group makes.
- Is listened to by group members.
- Makes more comments to the entire group.⁶⁶

Being aware of status differences can help you predict who talks to whom. If you can discern status differences, you'll also be better able to predict the type of messages communicated.

Status influences group communication, but just because a person has high status does not mean that his or her ideas are good ones. Don't let status differences influence your perceptions of the value of the ideas contributed. Some groups get into trouble because they automatically defer to the person with more status without reviewing the validity of the ideas presented. Similarly, don't dismiss ideas out of hand because the person who suggested them doesn't have high status or prestige. Focus on the quality of the message, not just on the messenger.

How to Manage Team Power Differences

Power is the ability to influence others' behavior. You have power if you can get others to do what you want. Although status (prestige and importance) and power (ability to influence) sometimes go hand in hand, a group member could have status and still not be able to influence how others behave. You could, for example, be the designated team leader but not be perceived as having much influence on the team because your ideas aren't valued or you may have no resources to back up what you say and do. Because leadership is the process of

terms & definitions

Team mission statement a concise description of a team's goals or desired outcomes.

Status an individual's importance and prestige.

Power the ability to influence others' behavior.

We've Got to Stop Meeting Like This

The best meetings do more than simply shovel piles of information at people. They provide an opportunity for discussion, on-task conversation, and on-point dialogue. If a meeting is where people merely give speeches, then it's not a meeting—it's a speech. Susan Docherty, whom we noted in the last chapter served as the leader of the United States sales, service, and marketing team at General Motors, abhors "speechy" meetings, especially meetings that overly rely on mind-numbing PowerPoint presentations. She notes,

I actively despise how people use PowerPoint as a crutch. I think PowerPoint can be a way to cover up sloppy thinking, which makes it hard to differentiate between good ideas and bad ideas. I would much rather have somebody type something longhand, send it in ahead of the meeting and then assume everybody's read it, and then you start talking, and let them defend it.

The question from the beginning of the meeting to the end of the meeting is, "Have we added value: yes or no?" And I would say that if the meeting is mostly the presentation of a deck of PowerPoint slides, you conveyed information, but you didn't actually add value.¹³

Make sure your meetings aren't merely occasions for people to give speeches. If you're the meeting leader, develop an agenda that includes an opportunity for discussion. If you're a meeting participant, gently and politely ask for a memo that summarizes key information, a policy summary, or data analysis *before* the meeting. There may be times when information needs to be shared with other members during the meeting; but if that's the primary function of the meeting, consider writing a memo, sending an email, sharing a podcast, or distributing a video.

Many, if not most, meetings have multiple goals. Those attending a meeting may first hear information presented, then discuss the information, and finally take some action to accomplish the meeting goal. If you are the meeting leader, before beginning to draft your agenda, you need to know the meeting goal; you want to identify what you would like to have happen as a result of the meeting. A typical goal might be, "At the end of this meeting we will have decided who to hire for the new advertising job," or "At the end of the meeting we will have discussed and evaluated the sales figures for the last three months." Without a specific goal, it's likely you'll accomplish little.

Developing the Meeting Agenda

Once you have identified goals and assessed what you need to talk about, it's time to develop an agenda—to arrange the items in the most effective way to achieve your goals. An agenda is the written list of issues, questions, or topics that serves as the primary tool to help you structure the order in which you talk about each topic. If you are leading a meeting, it's your responsibility to develop the meeting agenda. The agenda is your key tool to give your meeting structure. Here are the key steps to developing a meeting agenda:

1. IDENTIFY MEETING ISSUES AND QUESTIONS Your first task in developing your agenda is to consider all of the topics, issues, and questions you need to discuss to achieve your meeting goals. As you start to identify the various agenda items, you don't need to worry about what order to place them (you'll make those decisions later). First, just identify the agenda items. Once you have a first draft of your agenda items, you arrange the topics and issues in a logical structure.

We recommend that rather than using a single word as an agenda item, or even using a short phrase, *make each agenda item a question to be answered*. Instead of simply writing "hiring policy" on the agenda, write, "What changes should we make in our hiring policy?" By using a question you invite interaction. You and other meeting participants also know precisely why you are having the discussion—to answer a specific question. Using a question as an agenda item, as shown in Figure 10.2, also helps meeting participants be better prepared for the meeting. They will have a clearer idea about what will be discussed. You'll also know when you have finished a particular agenda item. You're finished when you've answered the question.

terms & definitions

Agenda a written list of issues, questions, information, or topics to be discussed or tasks to be completed in a meeting.

Meeting Place: The Centennial Building, Abernathy Conference Room

Meeting Time: Tuesday, September 19, at 3:30 PM

Meeting Goals: At the end of the meeting, meeting participants should be able to

1. Identify positive and negative reactions to the finance report.
2. Describe how the new employment policy will influence hiring practices.
3. Identify strategies to increase sales.

I. DISCUSSION ITEMS

- A. Are there any other agenda items we need to discuss today?
- B. What are positive and negative reactions to the finance report distributed before the meeting?
- C. How will the new employment policy influence hiring practices?

II. ACTION ITEMS

What can be done to improve our sales figures during the next sales period?

III. INFORMATION ITEMS

Announcements

FIGURE 10.2 Sample Agenda

2. GROUP ISSUES AND QUESTIONS ACCORDING TO MEETING GOALS Organize the agenda around your meeting goals. Use subheadings of information items, discussion items, and action items to signal to team members the goal of the discussion. If your meeting goal is to discuss the pros and cons of the new strategic plan, then your agenda would likely include such straightforward questions as, "What are the benefits of the new strategic plan?" and "What are the disadvantages of the new strategic plan?"

3. ESTIMATE HOW MUCH TIME TO BUDGET FOR EACH QUESTION OR ISSUE Before making final decisions about which items you will discuss, estimate how long you think the team will need to discuss each item. How much time you budget for a discussion will help you decide where to place the item on the agenda.

4. STRATEGICALLY SEQUENCE AGENDA ITEMS There is an art to determining the order in which you introduce agenda items. Your goal in developing the agenda sequence is to maximize the efficient use of meeting time while also balancing structure and interaction.

Some meeting management experts suggest putting your most important item first because usually what is introduced first takes the most time. When you have lots of money in your bank account you probably don't monitor every penny you spend; but when you're down to only a few dollars in your account, you're aware of everything you spend. This same analogy holds in meetings. It's time rather than money that is the "currency" of meetings. When you are at the beginning of your meeting you have a "full bank account" of time, so team members may be more likely to talk without monitoring how long they talk. So rather than beginning a meeting with routine information items that are likely to spark digressions from the agenda, it may be best to make your first agenda item something of vital importance to the group that clearly relates to one or more of your meeting goals.

Consider these additional meeting agenda sequencing tips and suggestions:

- Start your meeting by actively involving members in finalizing the agenda; ask them for reactions to how you have structured the discussion. Ask participants if they have other items to include on the agenda in an effort to avoid digressions and surprise agenda additions later.
- Consider making your first agenda item a question or issue that will immediately involve all meeting members in active discussion. By placing a high-priority item early in the meeting, you take advantage of having people talk about an issue when they are fresher.

- Consider placing the most challenging issues for discussion in the middle of the meeting, thus giving the group a chance to get oriented at the beginning and ease out of the discussion at the end.
- If you have an issue that you know is contentious and will generate conflict, place it after an agenda item on which you think the team will reach agreement. Use the positive energy of the issue of agreement to help when there are issues that may divide the team.
- You may want to first string together several small issues so you can dispense with them before getting into the meat of the meeting. Quickly zipping through several agenda items can give the team energy.
- Consider placing routine reports at the end of the meeting; if you run out of time you can distribute the information in a memo or by email.

Always distribute an agenda to meeting participants *before* the meeting. Without an agenda or some knowledge of what will be discussed at the meeting, participants won't know how to prepare. In addition to asking for feedback about the meeting agenda before you begin the meeting, periodically ask meeting participants if the agenda is serving its purpose. Ask, "Are we still discussing useful information?" or "Is our agenda helping us achieve our meeting goals?"

In addition to distributing copies of the agenda before the meeting and having copies of the agenda to distribute when you meet, it's sometimes useful to display the meeting agenda using a flipchart, a PowerPoint slide, or some other visual means. Having a common image to look at can help keep a group focused on its goal.

Having adequate structure is important not only for meetings that take place in person, but also for virtual groups that meet via teleconference or the Internet. Research suggests that a virtual team will make better decisions during a meeting if it has appropriate instructions for framing the decision as well as enough time to process the information. Table 10.1 summarizes potential meeting agenda problems and how to manage those problems.

Leading Team Meetings

Leaders often are the ones who determine whether to have a meeting. They help set the meeting goal and shape the agenda. Although the leader is a key influence in making these

TABLE 10.1

Meeting Agenda Pitfalls and Strategies for Managing Them

Potential Pitfall	Suggested Strategy
Participants tend to spend too much time on early agenda items.	Make the first agenda item something worthy of discussion rather than beginning with a trivial report or announcement.
Participants find a way to talk even if you don't want them to talk.	Invite input and discussion early in the meeting rather than having participants trying to interrupt.
Participants aren't prepared for the meeting; they have not read what they were supposed to read.	Clarify the team's ground rules about being prepared for meetings. Consider taking a few minutes to have participants read information or have them prepare by writing ideas or suggestions using this silent-brainstorming technique.
Participants won't stick to the agenda.	Remind the group what the meeting goals are, or, with input from the group, change agenda items.
A meeting is scheduled late in the day or participants are tired.	Begin with an agenda item that involves all meeting participants rather than having participants sitting silently at the beginning of the meeting.
The agenda includes a controversial item that will create conflict and disagreement.	Put one or more noncontroversial items on the agenda ahead of the conflict-producing item. Addressing easier agenda items first will establish a feeling of accomplishment and agreement before the group tackles the more controversial item.