

Communication and Collaboration

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It's time to work on YOU, so sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

As a leader, you deal with employees, clients, customers, stakeholders and various other relevant parties. To be an effective leader, excellent communication is critical, and excellent communication requires adaptability.

How you interact with employees will differ significantly from how you interact with customers, which will differ from how you interact with investors, and so on. In your position, you must know how to navigate these different relationships.

Communication and collaboration have simple definitions, but they're notoriously complex skills to master. They are not just about progressing towards your goals as efficiently as possible. They're about helping your employees feel more comfortable in their roles so they can better contribute and participate. Get them right, and you'll be greatly rewarded.

Let's focus first on communication, specifically workplace communication.

Workplace communication comes in many different forms. Some of the most common examples include project status updates, team meetings, the transfer of relevant information, and the delivery of feedback. Each of these plays a vital role in a business, and leaders must know how to approach them.

Communication must be tailored to each case. Project status updates, for example, are typically delivered to a stakeholder, which itself can refer to many people, including

- Senior directors in your company
- Investors
- Third-party contractors
- Government bodies.

Offering them updates first involves determining what information they **actually need** to know. For example:

- Investors want to know what their money is being used for.
- Government bodies want assurances of your compliance with rules and regulations. Senior directors need to hear whether you are on track to complete a project on schedule and within budget.

Draft a communication plan to help share project updates. This plan should outline the details of every major stakeholder, their role in the project, information channels of interest to them, and methods and schedules for delivering that information.

It's a good idea, every so often, to run an internal audit of your company's current communications to fully realise the benefits of your new communication plan. An audit might sound odious and unnecessary, but it would be remiss to dismiss it out of hand. **According to enterprise collaboration software company Oak Engage, an audit** can help you identify what you might be missing with your stakeholder comms, including:

- Gaps in information
- Messages that aren't reaching your audience,
- Miscommunications
- Channels that aren't delivering the way you want them to

You can do a lot of great work on a communication plan by learning from past mistakes and recognising what needs to change about your current communication strategies. The added visibility and accountability will help you build trust with stakeholders, too. It will show them that you have spent real time and effort on your relationship with them.

Moving on from stakeholder updates, let's briefly touch upon team meetings. Team meetings should feel like conversations that are productive and further progress your projects.

Every meeting should have a clearly defined goal, and it should be one that can be best achieved if the team engages in a lively discussion. As the leader, you must encourage this. That way, the meetings will be more interesting for the team members, and they'll be more likely to contribute.

You can also encourage more and better contributions by promoting a sense of belonging. Consider this analysis by Sunnie Giles of HBR [1]:

There are some simple ways to promote a sense of belonging among employees. Smile at people, call them by their name, and remember family members' names. Pay close attention when speaking to them, and clearly set the tone of the members of your team having each other's backs.

Fostering this kind of environment within your team meetings can be achieved in a few ways. You can alternate the roles of timekeeper, minute-taker, and facilitator so that people can have the opportunity for somewhat different experiences each time. You could also start each meeting with an icebreaker, end it with a game, or assign some specific time to more general talking points unrelated to work.

These might sound a bit silly, but some lighthearted fun makes things more comfortable and gets people more engaged.

It's also key to include a Q&A session in every team meeting agenda. Let people voice their concerns about the project, offer suggestions, and generally feel more comfortable looking for help. Team meetings allow you to build an environment based on effective communication. You should take full advantage of that.

Mastering the art of communication will lead you directly into more effective collaboration. So far, we've discussed the effective exchange of information and the importance of good rapport among your team. Putting that into practice to work towards your common goal is a different challenge.

That's collaboration. Working together with people to complete a project or task. Let's get into that.

Most projects require a lot of documents, assets, and information about tasks and deadlines, and having a place where all of that can be stored and discussed is a massive benefit. You should have a Single Source of Truth. Stephen Roddewig explained this concept in an article on HubSpot [2]:

Single Source of Truth is a philosophy for collecting data from across the enterprise and aggregating it into a central repository. As organisations grow, it's common that data relevant to individual pieces of the business will live in specific applications and systems used to drive these operations. This is a natural outcome, but data also informs decisions made outside of the teams that generate this information.

A Single Source of Truth gathers all relevant data in one place. The specific applications and systems mentioned would still exist, but they would be integrated into the Single Source of Truth, so even team members not responsible for those systems can access information about them.

If your company has a marketer who works primarily with an email automation tool, they would still use that tool, but the copy and subsequent performance of the emails

would be available to view in the SSoT. Your company's social media accounts might be managed by one person but seen by everyone in the SSoT.

Without an SSoT, you will end up with each project branch being worked on much too independently. Teamwork will be inhibited, information that might be helpful won't be accessible, and things will slow down or have to be changed later on.

Another essential aspect of collaboration is **accountability**. A great example of this is the pit teams in an F1 race. In 2019, the world record for the fastest pit stop was set at just 1.82 seconds – not bad for such a great number of actions (change of tyres, mechanical repairs, adjustments to the wings and many more. Harry Birrell writes:

There are clearly defined roles and responsibilities complete with their own boundaries, strategies, goals and outcomes. They are a team of individuals who can count on the person next door doing their job in a predefined and agreed-upon pattern (or process)... Each team member understands the order of their own duties and how that impacts the overall outcome and performance of the team. They have trust in the team, trust in each other, trust in the process and trust in their management that they are making the right decisions. Each team member takes ultimate accountability for their actions and their outcomes. They own their role within the team.

It's important to remember, though, that your job as a leader is not to punish or humiliate anyone. Don't make your people afraid of taking accountability. Giving people a goal and making it clear how important each person is to your goal is important, but if you create a culture of fear, things get covered up, problems snowball, and all transparency is lost.

Your response needs to be balanced - they must understand the impact of mistakes on the entire team and your clients. A good, simple maxim to live by is this [3]: **"Be tough on standards, be tender on people."**

It's also a good idea to try to make your accountability expectations more solution-focused. Ron Carucci talked about this for Forbes and said [4]:

Solution-focused accountability requires a certain level of humility from leaders. Notably, it entails recognising that your own shortcomings can be a contributing factor in an employee not meeting expectations with a particular assignment. This level of accountability also encourages consistent feedback to follow through on agreed-upon solutions.

Ultimately, you're responsible for your team. A good leader's first instinct is self-reflection if a report makes a mistake. Did the report get sufficient training? Was the ask realistic, to begin with? Have I created the environment for my reports to flourish in the first place? Taking responsibility for mistakes when things don't go well is leading by example and will encourage others to do the same. That kind of

accountability leads to genuine transparency, making communication and collaboration infinitely easier.

To summarise, communication and collaboration are two different things, but they're inextricably linked. Both are of paramount importance, and you should prioritise them as critical areas of focus for your team. Communication is a multi-faceted concept. It involves external communication with stakeholders and internal communication amongst your team.

Collaboration is about working together to achieve a common goal. This requires you and your team to take responsibility for your assigned tasks, share as much relevant information as possible, and be clear on your overall goals.

Get your team working together in a trust-based communication environment emphasising strong collaboration, and your projects will be all the better for it. The best way for you to gain a complete understanding of these ideas is to put them into practice.

As an exercise, you and your team could conduct a post-mortem on a project that didn't go so well. This is simply a meeting to reflect on how a project was handled, and you could use it as an opportunity to apply what you've learned about communication and collaboration.

Discuss how processes like drafting a communication plan, doing an internal audit, and using an SSoT may have helped and open up the floor to other ideas from the team that they think could have been applied. Not only does this give you the chance to get a practical perspective on a genuine project, but the port-mortem is a collaboration of its own.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening and remember: keep building the best you.

[1] *The Most Important Leadership Competencies According to Leaders Around the World*, Sunnie Giles (2016)

<https://hbr.org/2016/03/the-most-important-leadership-competencies-according-to-leaders-around-the-world>

[2] *Single Source of Truth: Benefits, Challenges and Examples*, Stephen Roddewig (2023)

<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/single-source-of-truth>

[3] *The Secret to Effectively Managing Employee Mistakes*, Andrew Bryant (2020)

<https://www.selfleadership.com/blog/secret-effectively-managing-employee-mistakes>

[4] *It's Time to Overhaul Our Understanding of Accountability*, Ron Carucci (2022)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/roncarucci/2022/06/04/its-time-to-overhaul-our-understanding-of-accountability/?sh=62121ecb3497>