Agile Communication

Organization communication encompasses both the pre-planned formal, arte-fact centric communication and micro-level need centric informal, impromptu interactions. The former includes vision, mission, goals, job descriptions, performance targets, standard-operating-procedures, client proposals, periodic customer feedbacks, sign-off criteria, SLAs, performance management, performance appraisals,workshops, seminars etc. While the latter comprises verbal client feedbacks, impromptu team meetings, informal discussions in the café, unscheduled dip stick checks and associated discussions. The fact thatorganization communication is something that needs to be given emphasis is obvious. But the reality is that generally, including in our organization,the arte-fact centric communication dominates the communication plan while the power of the micro-level communication is largely unrecognized. Communication systems – and we are not talking of technology here – offer a huge opportunity to improve alignment, motivation and productivity levels amongst workforce.

From experience we know that, the run-of-the-play momentum of associated with different individuals, projects, teams and assigned tasks create their own habit patterns that are not entirely in sync with the larger objectives. In organizations where people are required to make micro level choices very often, individual characteristics or habit patterns become crucial to success. It is these organizations, intrinsic abilities and working competencies determine the quality of work outcomes to a large extent and often there is substantial deviation and quality and productivity. The difference inoutcomes is as much (and often more) because of lack of alignment than because of lack of functional or technical knowledge.

Probably to create such an alignment, in many IT organizations agile computing has replaced waterfall method of development. Agile computing institutionalize mechanisms that create active collaboration on a day to day level (sometimes session to session level). While, agile computing or its parallel may not be relevant in all types of businesses; non-intrusive 'alert sensors' need to be in place to identify early deviations and intervene dynamically (not periodically as a part ofquality control activities) before they create substantial damage (say, in the form of re-work, drop quality of outcomes).The 'alert sensors' are proactive risk mitigators in the form of senior, peer, automated, self-managed, interventions that can track a deviation at an ideation level and not after the job is done.

To be fair to ourselves, such an alignment is currently carried out in most organizations. However, it is highly personality centric and maybe operating in islands as a reactive back-room channel. Peers, bosses, arte-facts, developmental programmes, back room grapevine all need to converge to adroitly and humanely identify a possible mis-aglinment at a granular level and give a slight nudge to right align early on. This is what I meant by the communication systems in the first para. A personality independent, pervasive communication systems in the form of guidelines for informal interaction and personal work management, is what which I refer to as Agile Communication.Agile communication will be crucial to identify micro-level deviation risk early on. Especially for fast burgeoning and dynamic work teams. The impromptu team meetings, informal discussions in the café, unscheduled dip stick checks and associated discussions which are a key part of any team can be the core pillars of such communication systems. Agile communication systems, will legitimize the quintessential 'grapevine', and bring to its fold a larger proportion of the workforce. In addition, individual feedback loops, like daily to-dos, personal work-plans, quality check-points which play a critical role in bringing about due focus on defined objectives can also be a part of the agile communication systems.

A systemic view of such communication channels, is a new concept. The interventions will be optimized over time and the optimal states will vary from organization to organization and from team to team. Irrespective of how the systems emerge and what their pillars would be, agile communication will consciously focus on micro-level alignment as an end in itself. Communication will cease to be a milestone or culmination of an activity; it will be a strategic objective in itself.

A pre-requisite of this to be effective, is to divide work into smaller team and a manageable span of control for supervisors. Also, critical to the success of this system is a highly disciplined (almost fanatic) breaking down of the broader objectives to arrive at the objectives of a day,a session, a task or an individual. To evaluate all choices from the framework of the tightly defined objective of a task. To use a process flow approach is delineating expectations in terms of outcomes of individual members interfaces between team members. To leverage easy to use tools to reiterate the above habits and to be alert to the deviations between the laid down objectives and work direction. Equally important will be internalize organization wide the habits of giving feedback without being judgmental and listening to feedback without being defensive. In essence a sense of mutual respect and trust, needs to be laced with high self- assurance.

Certainly this perspective of communication will add cost layers, however once there is a consensus that it is an investment on alignment and will lead to reduced re-work, enhanced customer delight and hence customer loyalty, or better employee engagement then it can be accorded due priority.

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Jul 26-30, 2013
First published in www.unmuddlings.blopspot.com