

Is Face To Face Obsolete?

Facebook, Twitter, Yelp (sounds like something your dog does), LinkedIn, Myspace, etc., etc., etc! So, who needs face to face communication? We communicate all the time with everyone we know. At work, we collaborate with our colleagues in Hong Kong and Turkey through e-mail and Skype. Video-conferencing has improved to the point that it seems almost like real life, real time. So, what's the point? Travel is expensive. We are in tough economic times and hotels, airfares, auto rentals, and restaurants have not gotten any cheaper. All of these tools are powerful communication aids that help us do business in today's world. It would be impossible to sustain business relationships with colleagues in remote locations without them. But, there are trade offs. If leaders rely exclusively on electronic communication, it becomes very difficult to truly build a team. Even if the subject is not on your leadership training agenda, it will come up during discussions and question and answer sessions.

It is widely understood that the vast majority of information exchanged during any conversation is transmitted through nonverbal channels; tone of voice, body language, eye contact, posture, gestures, facial expressions, and so on. It is through these nonverbal channels of communication that most of the information about the relationship is handled. Much of the information about status, power, trust, affection, and so on is certainly compromised in electronic communication of any kind. How important these things are to conducting business may vary considerably from culture to culture. What may seem a simple inquiry in one culture may imply an accusation of incompetence in another. There is also "tone" communicated in e-mails. The meaning of that tone is, however, far more subject to interpretation than in face-to-face communication and there is no simple way to verify its meaning. During one leadership training workshop a participant told this story. Two of his colleagues (Tom and Dave) were not speaking to one another. When he asked one of them what was wrong, the man replied, "Tom yelled at me." After further questioning, he discovered that Dave had sent him an e-mail in all capital letters. Tom interpreted that as yelling. When he then approached Dave and told him what Tom had said, Dave said, "I wasn't yelling. We had a team meeting



and decided that we would engage the caps lock key for all of our correspondence. Fewer keystrokes!" (It was an IT group). So, for

several days, these two "adults" had not spoken to one another over a simple misunderstanding of meaning. Compound that misunderstanding by the complexity of different corporate cultures, different languages, different ethnic backgrounds, and so forth. The potential for serious problems becomes very high.

In some cultures, individuals will not return an e-mail to someone that they have not met and spoken with at some length. It is important in other cultures to establish the relationship first before any business is transacted. These issues are much more salient in today's world of global teams. In a study of global teams at Digital Technologies, Management Professor Edward McDonough said, "Although many of the shortcomings associated with these technologies have been overcome, most companies have found that technology alone has not been the answer to achieving satisfactory global team performance." Writing for the Institute for Global Innovation Management, Dr. Gloria Barczak makes a strong case for global teams having face-to-face meetings at the start of a project. When developing global teams, she states, "We found that three actions are particularly critical to creating effective global teams - holding an initial face-to-face team meeting that lasts a minimum of 3 days, increasing the amount of communication amongst team members, and holding periodic progress update meetings. Though the initial meeting sets the stage in facilitating communication, building trust, and establishing interpersonal relationships, continual efforts to increase communication and project progress meetings serve to reinforce and expand these behaviors that are crucial to effective cross-functional global new product development."

While various kinds of electronic communication are very important during the ongoing execution of a project, the absence of face-to-face meetings at the beginning creates an extremely high risk of

misalignment. People are not clear on their goals and tasks. They have little sense of how or to whom to communicate when there are problems. The rules of interaction tend to remain vague. Accountabilities may be obscure. Without the initial face-to-face meetings, teams find it hard to keep focused, maintain commitment, stay motivated and to maintain important relationships.



Leadership training that encourages a frank discussion of the issues related to global teams may be crucial to the success of such projects. All kinds of communication will be needed. More e-mails, video conferences, and other media will

play an important role in keeping the project moving forward but to establish the foundation, get buy in, commitment, understanding, and a strong sense of teamwork, there is no real substitute for old fashioned face-to-face communication.

¹ McDonough, Edward R. III, and Cedrone, David, "Meeting the challenge of global team management," *Research Technology Management*. July 1, 2000.

² Barczak, Gloria, "Managing Global New Product Development Teams," Working paper at the Institute for Global Innovation Management, Northeastern University, Boston, MA.

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