

## Face Time

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

When leaders work with teams, it is easier to grow and maintain trust when the teams are in the same location. The ability to observe body language in face to face encounters makes communication rich and precise. Granted, people working in close quarters do have a propensity to drive each other crazy at times, but amid the squabbles, team rapport and association do develop. Team cohesion and communication can be enhanced when people are in the same location.

Over the past four decades, organizations have become less centralized. It is a rare group that does not have some component or a sister group in a different location. Groups that are spread out in different locations, even in just adjacent buildings, become polarized from each other easier and eventually identify with their geographical counterparts more than the people at the other location. Does that mean that communication has to suffer? How does a leader effectively manage a virtual team and facilitate the ability of geographically separated teams to communicate well and build trust?

The decentralization trend has been counterbalanced by the rise of instant communication enabled by advances in software and electronic technology, especially the rectangular goodies we all carry. Even though people are spread out all over the world, the ability to communicate to anyone on a moment's notice means that communication could actually be superior to what we experienced a decade ago. But will it be?

The increased volume of messages may be offset by the problem of lack of face to face communication. In an old study (circa 1965), Albert Mehrabian at UCLA tried to measure how much meaning we get when communicating face to face from 1) the words used, 2) the tone of voice, and 3) the facial expression. His experiment was confined to communication about feelings or attitudes, but the results were that only about 7% of meaning comes from the words. The remaining 93% of meaning came from things that are not present in electronic texts or e-mails.

While there have been additional studies since the 1960's, the general conclusion remains that the words represent only a small fraction of meaning when two people converse. Unfortunately, words are all we have in e-mail, chats, or texts, except for those wonderful emoticons that can give a tiny sliver of what a true facial expression can convey.

Using texting technology as a substitute for face to face communication has tradeoffs that need to be understood and agreed upon. As the younger generation refuses to look up from their devices even to glimpse the person sitting next to them, preferring to text rather than speak, the quality of communication may be lower in the future unless we specifically find ways to enrich the pattern with good quality face time.

Video chat and video meeting technology can be keys to regaining the personal touch in communicating between locations. Here the visual element can be preserved, and a permanent record kept of interactions. Don't forget the telephone! It adds the audio element, the tone of voice and emphasis that can tell us so much.

### **How can a leader effectively use technology to build trust and cohesion in a decentralized team environment?**

- Clarify a strategy for how communication should be optimized for their particular team dynamic.
- Ensure all team members are trained to use all the different communication methods properly and have the proper equipment to use it easily.
- Have a well understood policy for when to use each type of communication. What sorts of communications need a permanent record? When is it important to be able to see a person, face to face? Some decisions are not clear cut, but it is important for the leader to teach the team what to consider when making the choice of how to communicate.
- Model the behavior you wish to see.

We have so many different types of communication available today. Use them wisely, and teach your teams to do the same to have more cohesive decentralized teams. A resource you might find helpful is my friend Nancy Settle-Murphy, who writes a blog titled "[Guided Insights.](#)" If you are a leader trying to maximize communication in a virtual group, I highly recommend taking a look at her work. She often has creative and pragmatic advice to add to the things you may already know.

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