

# Quality Beats Quantity in Team Communications

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Team communication is essential in every workplace, be it a hospital, flight deck, military unit, or nuclear plant. But when it comes to effective communication, quality beats quantity, according to research from a team at Rice University.

In a recently published scientific analysis, the scientists led by graduate student Shannon Marlow found that large amounts of back-and-forth communication weren't always as productive for teams as deliberate, high-quality communication. Information can overload team members if the frequency is too great, or the most important details could get lost in the sheer volume of information, the scientists suggest.

The research team drew its findings from a review of 150 studies involving 9,702 organizational teams. One of the biggest findings was that "communication quality had a significantly stronger relationship with performance than communication frequency," says Marlow.

The findings challenge the assumption that constant and abundant communication is critical to team

success according to Eduardo Salas, professor of Psychology at Rice University and co-author on the paper. “Effective teams are quiet,” he says. “Effective teams share unique information. Effective teams engage in a pattern of information exchange that is accurate, precise, timely.”

“People often discuss ‘team communication’ but don’t always specify exactly what type of communication they’re referring to,” Marlow says. “They could be referring to the frequency with which team members interact or the quality of communication within the team or another type of communication. It’s important to be specific.”

The effect of communication quality on performance applied to teams that worked face-to-face and those that were already familiar, but wasn’t found in virtual teams or unfamiliar teams that these researchers studied. This doesn’t mean that communication wasn’t important to virtual teams, or that in-person teams were always better at communicating or performed better. But the improvement in performance with higher communication quality was a trait of in-person and familiar teams, not virtual or unfamiliar ones. Marlow and colleagues suggest that virtual teams may employ other teamwork strategies to compensate for their limited ability to communicate virtually (to make up for their lack of nonverbal or incidental communication, perhaps).

In a 2015 article, Nancy Cooke, professor of Human Systems Engineering described the concept of “interactive team cognition” as decision-making and behavior activities that happen within a group, and cannot be separated into individually held knowledge or skills. Cooke states that team interactions are central to team cognition, and that:

1. Team cognition is an activity, not a property or product.
2. Team cognition is inextricably tied to context.
3. Team cognition is best measured and studied when the team is the unit of analysis.

Cooke points out that adequate knowledge is not enough for team decision-making to occur, teams with a complete knowledge base but inadequate interactions will have ineffective interactions. Communication is important. Cooke presents this viewpoint as a way to a richer understanding of team dynamics and more effective team interventions.

Marlow and colleagues recommend that academic research using the interactive team cognition perspective, and indeed any research centered on team performance and communication should separate aspects of communication. They also suggest that any intervention aimed at increasing team performance through communication focus on improving communication quality, and consider the specific aspects of communication in striving for improved performance.

## References

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