ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

They'll negotiate; they're corporate.
Johnny in *Johnny Mnemonic*

This chapter looks at interpersonal and group communication, especially as they relate to professional settings. Interpersonal communication refers to one-on-one or small group interactions. Research generally suggests that this type of communication is influential in changing opinions, dealing with resistance and apathy to issues, and generally maintaining harmony in social situations – more so than its opposite, mass communication. The main features of interpersonal media are:

1. They provide a two-way exchange of information. Individual participants can obtain clarification, explanation and negotiation. This characteristic of interpersonal networks often allows them to overcome problems of message distortion caused by excessive noise (as described in chapter two).
2. They generally have a significant effect in persuading an individual to form or to change a strongly held attitude.
3. In many situations, they can help to resolve conflict because they provide a means to air personal feelings and deal with misunderstandings or grudges.

Here we discuss interpersonal communication in business and management contexts, by focusing on *cultural influence, team interaction, conflict, information management,* and *project management*.

1. CULTURE

Individuals interact in networks or groups which carry expectations, rules, norms and ideals. These regulative practices are based on assumptions about the order of things, values, ethical beliefs, and attitudes towards status and authority - all characteristics of the misleadingly transparent concept 'culture'. Meanings about the world and its objects are constructed in social interactions within or between cultural groups and then serve to identify the group both socially and globally.

So what is culture? For the purpose of this discussion, I define it as: *a system of activities and discourses, which have been codified and crystallized by usage, and which reflect the conventional practices of a group.* All collectivities develop a culture over time – a nation has a culture, as do an organization, a fan club and a gang. Complex societies have a diversity of cultures, including those of minority groups, such as ethnic cultures, gay culture, etc. The more complicated a culture becomes, the greater the chance that groups will break apart to form sub-cultures, which may be *alternative* (different from the mainstream, but not challenging it), or *oppositional* (different from the mainstream and attempting to change it in their light) (Williams 1980; de Certeau 2002).

As regards the culture of business or government organisations, this is manifest in such factors as the organisation's objectives and 'mission', hierarchy (allocation of roles in

order of seniority), internal and external patterns of negotiation, and conflict management. The organisation's public image is also significant in making cultural values apparent and known to others. This is achieved through various community-oriented projects and ecological initiatives, encompassed under the umbrella term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Researchers in business communication have offered several models and taxonomies of features that help to define the culture of an organisation. Robbins and Barnwell (2002), for example, distinguish the following as key elements in analysing business culture:

1. Individual initiative: how much and what kind of responsibility, freedom and independence do individuals have?
2. Risk tolerance: are employees encouraged to take initiatives and engage in risk-taking behaviour?
3. Direction: are the organisation's objectives and performance expectations clearly communicated and implemented?
4. Integration: is it easy for groups within the organisation to operate in a coordinated manner and are they motivated to do so?
5. Management contact: are managers accessible, supportive and helpful to their subordinates?
6. Control: to what degree and what kind of rules and supervision regulations does the organisation employ to oversee employee performance?
7. Identity: does the organisation encourage employees to identify with the company and the company's public image?
8. Reward system: how and to what degree are employees rewarded for their performance (i.e. through promotion, salary increases, bonus schemes, etc).
9. Conflict tolerance: is there a mechanism and/or procedure that allows employees to communicate conflicts and criticisms?
10. Communication patterns: are communication channels restricted to the formal hierarchy of command, or are they diverse (i.e. do junior employees have easy access to senior managers; can members of one section cooperate with members of another)?

Answers to these questions would come from surveys of company employees, an examination of formal company procedures, and case studies involving particular situations where action and decision making reflect the company's structure and value system, i.e. its culture.

Two influential models in the analysis of organisational culture that we will consider here in some more detail are Geert Hofstede's (2001) practice dimensions, and House's (1998; House et al. 2004) GLOBE model.

Hofstede's work spans approximately a 20 year-period (from around late 1960s to late 1980s), and is based on two surveys, one conducted of 116,000 IBM employees scattered over 72 countries, and another conducted of 1150 male and 1150 female students from 23

countries. From this research, Hofstede distinguished five practice dimensions which he used to classify cultures. These are:

1. **Power distance**: the different attitudes to inequality between people. High-power distance cultures tend to value the following elements: hierarchy, fixed roles, authoritarian decision-making styles, and conformity. In addition, in such cultures subordinates are not often consulted in decision-making, and, in situations that involve negotiation, individuals tend to prefer to work with high-status negotiators rather than lower-level representatives (exemplified by the 'I want to talk to your manager' symptom). Low-power distance cultures, on the other hand, tend to value these elements: low hierarchical structure, independence, individual initiative, freedom (which could manifest in anything from the ability to voice dissent to being allowed to dress eccentrically), and consultative decision-making styles. In such cultures, subordinates tend to be consulted, and there is more emphasis on rewards and negotiation.

2. **Uncertainty avoidance**: the level of acceptance of an unknown future. High uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to exhibit the following characteristics: a preference for engaging in risky behaviour (such as initiating legal action), rather than waiting to see how a situation will unfold; security through predictability and routine; adherence to rules, regulations and operating procedures; traditional gender roles; controlled presence of innovators; and belief in specialists and experts. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to exhibit these characteristics: patience in taking action; belief in the importance of emotive or intuitive response to situations; freedom in gender roles; support for innovation and experimentation; and belief in generalists.

3. **Individualism versus collectivism**: the manner in which individuals are integrated in groups. Individualist cultures generally define identity according to personal and separate values. They tend to exhibit these characteristics: appreciation of an individual 'voice' or opinion; guiltless pursuit of self-interest and material gain; calculative relationships (exemplified by the 'what's in it for me?' symptom); and individual incentive. On the other hand, collectivist cultures generally define identity according to group positioning and communal values. They tend to exhibit these characteristics: decision-making in groups; focus on the pursuit of the public good; emotional commitment to group membership; collaborative incentive.

4. **Masculine versus feminine**: the manner in which roles and emotive responses are divided according to gender. This practice dimension reflects traditional gender roles that associate males with assertiveness and females with nurturance, and extends these into the organisational domain. Typical characteristics of masculine cultures include: importance of challenge and recognition; performance or results orientation; a division of individuals into 'losers' and 'winners'; more men in top management positions; competitive advantage in manufacturing industries and price competition. Typical characteristics of feminine cultures

include: cooperative orientation; process orientation and reflexive practice; more sympathy for the disadvantaged; easier for women to reach top management positions; competitive advantage in service industries and consulting.

5. **Long-term versus short-term orientation**: the different values attached to future as opposed to immediate results. Long term oriented cultures tend to value savings and investments, while short-term oriented cultures may be more entrepreneurial and focus on immediate gains. Long-term oriented cultures tend to exhibit these traits: persistence; deferral of gratification; a strong market position and relationship marketing; equality; and provision for old age (which is not seen as a negative factor). Short-term oriented cultures tend to exhibit these characteristics: schemes that produce fast results; appreciation of leisure time; grasping opportunities in business affairs; and deferral of concerns regarding old age.

Hofstede's practice dimensions do not represent exclusive or rigid categories, but rather a continuum of degrees between the two extremes of each dimension. Thus, for example, some cultures would probably fall somewhere in between long-term and short-term oriented or between individualist and collectivist. Also, a temporal element would come into play, with some cultures changing their positioning over time and under different circumstances.

For all its success as a research tool, Hofstede's model carries certain dangers typical of attempts to construct an abstract modelling of human behaviour. First, as happens in research based on surveys, the findings tend to be influenced by the wording of the questions and the circumstances in which the surveys were administered. It cannot be certain that the results would have remained the same if different wording was used and the surveys were repeated in different contexts. Second, even if the populations chosen to be surveyed constituted a representative sample and a substantial number of respondents were interviewed, the results would still be abstracted from the general attitudes of a majority. Exceptions that would actually contest the findings or that would highlight the circumstantial nature of responses are overshadowed. Finally, even though the results can be used for taxonomies and classifications of cultures, the evaluative or interpretative dimension is absent. For example, what does being an individualist or a collectivist actually mean to particular members of an organisation, and how does it play out in the social arena?

Bearing these reservations in mind, as anyone who has worked in different organisations or who has lived in different countries knows, culture is indeed a very influential factor in behaviour and attitude, in what one can and cannot do, and even in what one can or cannot *imagine* doing. In fact, structures and mental frames that determine our patterns of thinking are deeply embedded in social institutions and in language. To take one example, the Japanese language has different forms reserved for men and women, and for degrees of respect based on levels of seniority. In this case, unless a speaker actually impersonates another, s/he cannot express an identity that his/her social role is not culturally associated with. Identity is already inscribed in the status system of the culture

and reflected in linguistic form. As Harry Irwin (1996: 79) points out with regard to gender equality in Japan, '[t]his begs the question of whether a Japanese female manager could ever succeed in giving a direct order to a male, and presents a long-term and deeply rooted difficulty for Japanese women seeking workplace equality'.

The second approach to organisational culture that we consider here is based on Robert House's Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) model (House 1998; Javidan and House 2001; House et al 2004). The GLOBE model is based on surveys that asked participants to describe cultural situations both as they experience them in their organisations, and as they think they should ideally be. The GLOBE survey draws on data from around 17,000 questionnaires completed by middle mangers from approximately 825 companies in 62 countries. The GLOBE project broke the countries surveyed into ten clusters based on geography, common language, religion and historical factors. The ten GLOBE clusters are:

- Anglo
- Latin Europe
- Nordic Europe
- Germanic Europe
- Eastern Europe
- Latin America
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Arab
- Southern Asia
- Confusian Asia

Building on Hofstede and others' work on cultural influences on behaviour, the GLOBE study distinguishes nine cultural dimensions, as set out in the following table:

Table 1: The GLOBE Dimensions

GLOBE DIMENSION	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Assertiveness	The degree to which a culture encourages individuals to be confrontational and competitive as opposed to modest and accommodating	High-scoring cultures (e.g. USA, Austria) value competition and show sympathy for strong people. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. Sweden, New Zealand) value cooperation and solidarity. They show sympathy for the underprivileged.
Future orientation	The degree to which a culture encourages such future oriented practices as investing, planning and delaying gratification	High-scoring cultures (e.g. Singapore, the Netherlands) have a higher tendency to save and plan for the future. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. Italy, Russia) tend to make shorter term plans and to value immediate gratification.
Gender differentiation	The degree to which a culture emphasizes gender roles	High-scoring cultures (e.g. South Korea, China) favour traditional gender dichotomies. They tend to accord males higher social status

		than females. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. Poland, Denmark) do not favour strict gender dichotomies and tend to give females a stronger 'voice' in decision making.
Uncertainty avoidance	The degree to which a culture uses rules and procedures to counteract unpredictability	High-scoring cultures (e.g. Sweden, Germany) favour predictability and consistency, and have clear specifications of social expectations. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. Russia, Greece) tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty more, and have less structured social expectations.
Power distance	The degree to which a culture distributes power unequally	High-scoring cultures (e.g. Thailand, Spain) clearly distinguish between those with and those without power, and expect obedience towards superiors. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. Denmark, the Netherlands) favour stronger participation in decision making and expect a more equal distribution of power.
Collectivism versus individualism	The degree to which a culture expects individuals to be integrated in groups and categories	High-individualism scoring cultures (e.g. Italy, Greece) value self-interest, and reward individual performance. High-collectivism scoring cultures (e.g. Japan, South Korea) value similarity rather than difference, and are more likely to classify and group individuals, They tend to favour the collective good and cooperation more than individual autonomy.
In-group collectivism	The degree to which a culture expects individuals to belong to non-organisational groups, such as family units and circles of friends	High-scoring cultures (e.g. India, China) favour belonging to an in-group of family or friends. Nepotism (favouring one's relatives and friends in work situations) is common in such cultures, as is foregoing work commitments for family or personal reasons. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. Denmark, New Zealand) do not favour in- groups and individuals are not pressured to ignore work commitments for family or personal reasons.
Performance orientation	The degree to which a culture rewards individuals for performance improvement and excellence	High-scoring cultures (e.g. Singapore, USA) value initiative and a 'can-do' attitude. They favour a direct style of communication. Low-scoring

		cultures (e.g. Russia, Italy) tend to value loyalty and belonging, emphasising tradition and an individual's background rather than performance. These cultures tend to see feedback as negative, and associate competition with defeat.
Humane orientation	The degree to which a culture rewards altruism, generosity and a caring attitude	High-scoring cultures (e.g. Malaysia, Ireland) value human relations, sympathy and support for the weak or underprivileged. Low-scoring cultures (e.g. France, Germany) value power and material possessions as motivators. They tend to prefer assertive styles of conflict resolution, and expect individuals to solve their own problems.

Source: Adapted from Javidan and House 2001: 293-302.

Probably the first impression one would get from this classification is that it is based largely on stereotype. In fact, in many ways it is reminiscent of such generalizations as 'Southern Europeans are emotional', 'Scandinavians are well-organised', etc. In addition, as we discussed earlier regarding survey-based research, answers to questionnaires carry the risk that respondents may not have been truthful or that what they understood by particular terms may not be what the researcher intended. Also, the clustering itself may be based on assumptions that are quite arbitrary or at least not self-evident. For example, the GLOBE model classifies Japan as Confucian Asia – but how Confucian is Japan actually? Latin Europe includes Israel – but does Israel really have enough similarities with France, Italy and Spain to justify its inclusion in this cluster?

On the other hand, there is little doubt that such research is useful in bringing to light possible group reactions to situations, and in indicating the similarities and differences among these reactions. Classifying individual attitudes also plays an instrumental role in being able to talk about and understand these attitudes. In fact, the process of categorizing is part of human mental and cognitive make-up and is vital in the ability to reflect upon the objective world. The popularity of cultural models in business consulting and executive professional development courses shows that they are perceived as relevant and useful by industry practitioners. As cognitive scientists Glass and Holyoak (1989: 149) point out:

> If each experience were given a unique mental representation, we would be quickly overwhelmed [..]. By encoding experiences into an organized system of categories, we are able to recognize significant commonalities in different experiences.

What do these considerations imply for cultural influence on professional communication? Allowing for the fact that cultural models are general and therefore approximate, and also that the dichotomies they distinguish are two ends of a continuum

and not disconnected polar opposites, such models are useful in analyzing how different organizational structures and policies are often influenced by cultural values and expectations. Therefore, if they are used as analytical tools as opposed to as vehicles for negative stereotyping, they do have a role to play in helping to prevent cultural misunderstandings, acknowledge diversity, and enhance international collaboration.

Collaboration and misunderstandings, however, do not occur only between different cultures; they occur as part of any interpersonal act of communication. How these social phenomena play out among team members is the topic of the next section.

2. GROUPS AND TEAMS

This section looks at the ways humans communicate in a group situation. Research in group interaction has shown that, when formed, a group attains its own identity that exists irrespective of the identities or personal characteristics of each individual member. A group has a 'personality' of its own, so to speak. At the same time, the group with which one identifies or is a member of has a great effect in the individual's identity and social potential. As Hogg and Abrams (1988: 20) point out, 'the groups to which people belong will be massively significant in determining their life experience'.

Teams are also groups, but it is important to distinguish between a group and a team. As defined by Hogg and Abrams (1988: 7), a group comprises a number of individuals who 'perceive themselves to be members of the same social category'. So, groups include those who share the same ethnicity, those who share the same gender, those who share the same music tastes, those who share the same sexual orientation, and those who share the same hobby – to name just a few possibilities. Teams, on the other hand, are groups that have been formed for a specific purpose or task. The groups formed in work situations to carry out a project as well as the groups formed to play a game are examples of teams. A team may include members of different groups; people of different races, genders, sexual preferences and leisure tastes can come together to form a team for a purpose. Teams tend to have clear objectives, and more or less specified roles and duties, usually related to professional concerns. Since the aim of this chapter is to discuss interpersonal communication in business contexts, teams will be our main focus.

A. Team Dynamics

Those working in collaborative projects or in situations that require negotiation skills often use reasoning techniques to manage conflict and to sway others' opinions. The problem with this is that, in reality, issues of power play a major role in interpersonal communication, which means that many decisions are not made rationally. In fact, people are much more likely to respond positively to someone they believe is 'on their side', protects their interests, and shares their ideals than to someone who can produce a perfectly reasoned argument.

At their best, teams can produce excellent results by combining the specialised skills that individual team members bring. At their worst, teams produce delays, misunderstandings,

and conflicts. For this reason, the ability to deal productively with other people, peers, juniors and superiors is a highly valued skill that contributes greatly to the smooth and successful management of an organization (Marsen 2003).

Teams can be effective problem solvers for many reasons, including:

- More extensive information is available in a team than an individual may have alone.
- Individuals bring different approaches to a problem within the team. This allows for a wide range of options to be considered.
- Improved understanding of the problem and possible solutions is possible, because team members are aware of the reasoning used in problem analysis.
- It is more likely that consensus will be achieved if a decision was made in consultation with members of the team, so that no one feels 'left out', and therefore is not likely to oppose a decision.
- Risks can often be managed more effectively in teams. What can be a high-risk decision for an individual could actually be a moderate-risk decision for a team, because different team members bring new knowledge to the issue, and because risk is often a function of knowledge.
- Motivation and confidence are likely to increase in decisions made in team situations because individual team members feel supported by others.

Major disadvantages of reaching important decisions as part of a team include:

- Decisions can be made too soon: teams that feel uncomfortable with conflict may decide on the first option which meets with some support from the team members, regardless of whether this would be the best option.
- On the other hand, decisions can take too long, if the team cannot agree on a topic.
- If the team structure is too democratic, there may be a lack of initiative and responsibility.
- Teams may be influenced by one person, whose charismatic or persuasive strengths may induce members to overlook pertinent factors in the problem involved.
- If there is too much conflict in a team, the team may become inoperable or ineffective.
- Teams may displace responsibility so that it may be difficult to hold a team or an individual member accountable for a negative outcome.

Good team dynamics are generally achieved in three main ways:

1) members are attracted to the team's purpose;
2) members share similar values, needs and interests;
3) members fulfil for each other important interpersonal needs, such as affection (acknowledging each other's point of view), inclusion (allowing each member to

play a role in activities) and control (allowing each member to determine certain actions pertinent to the member's role).

Individuals participate in teams through the roles they play in them. Researchers have formulated different classifications of the role structure of teams. Two commonly used models are the *Task-Maintenance Classification* and the *Belbin Inventory of Team Roles*.

The Task-Maintenance Classification divides team roles into two main categories: *task roles* and *maintenance roles*. Task roles represent the actions members must take to accomplish specific goals, and include the roles of 'information giver', 'information seeker', 'expediter' and 'analyzer'. Maintenance roles represent the types of behaviour that each member must exhibit to keep the group functioning smoothly, and include the positive roles of 'supporter', 'harmonizer', 'gatekeeper', and the negative roles of 'aggressor', 'joker', 'withdrawer' and 'monopolizer' (Verderber and Verderber 1992).

It should be emphasized that all these roles are inclusive, in the sense that each member can play one or more roles within one team. The roles are defined in terms of what the team members do in response to situations that arise in the team interaction, not in terms of who the team members are, as in personality characteristics. Consider each role in more detail.

Task Roles
The information giver: This role entails providing content for discussion. Because the function of a team is most often to discuss or analyze and work with information, this role is the foundation of the team; usually all members play this role, unless one member is specifically assigned to present information from sources that s/he has researched. Information givers need to be well-prepared by having consulted various sources and having thought about the issue carefully before participating in a meeting. In business settings, the more objective and evidence-supported a team member's opinion is, the more this member's information giving role is appreciated and effective in influencing the team.

The information seeker: This role entails asking for more information or clarifications on an issue. Information seekers protect the team from reaching a decision before all sides have been considered, by eliciting more details and explanations on the issue. Again, in many teams, more than one person may assume the role of information seeker.

The expediter: This role entails keeping the team on track. Although digressions are sometimes useful in enlarging the scope of an issue or brainstorming alternative viewpoints, they are just as often a hindrance to the smooth functioning of team dynamics. The expediters help the group stick to the agenda, by asking for relevance.

The analyzer: This role entails analyzing the issue in depth by probing both information content and line of reasoning. Analyzers point out that the group has skipped a point, passed over a point too lightly or not considered pertinent information. Analyzers are important in acknowledging and addressing the complexity of an issue. Methods of

analyzers include asking questions that test the data presented, and asking for definitions and alternative viewpoints.

Maintenance Roles

The supporter: The supporter recognizes the contribution of team members and shows appreciation for their input. Supporters' methods are usually encouraging comments, or non-verbal cues, such as a smile or a nod.

The harmonizer: The harmonizer attempts to resolve conflict by reducing tension and straightening out misunderstandings and disagreements. This person tries to cool down high emotions by introducing objectivity in the discussion and mediating between hostile or opposing sides.

The gatekeeper: From the point of view of the consumer or client, gatekeepers generally have a bad reputation as those that prevent access to a desired location, person or object. For example, the secretary through whom we have to pass to reach the company president is a gatekeeper. In broadcasting, programming managers are gatekeepers in selecting the programs we watch or listen to, thereby channelling and restricting our options. From the point of view of management or team dynamics, however, gatekeepers are significant in monitoring that all eligible parties have equal access to a decision-making process, and in keeping communication channels between different parties open. In meetings, for instance, gatekeepers keep in check those who tend to dominate, and encourage those that are reluctant to contribute to be more forthcoming.

The aggressor: Aggressors produce conflict in a group by constantly or inordinately criticizing others' opinions or behaviour, and by making personal attacks when they do not agree on a point. One way to counteract aggressors is to take them aside and describe to them what they are doing, and the effect it is having on team dynamics.

The joker: Jokers produce conflict by ridiculing or playing down others' opinions or behaviour, or by making complex topics look light-hearted when in fact they need to be taken seriously. Humour is a positive factor in team dynamics helping members to keep their spirits up and see the optimistic side of things. However, if humour is inappropriate, inconsiderate or offensive, it needs to be kept in check to avoid irritation or resentment. Like with aggressors, the best way to deal with jokers is to make them aware of what they are doing.

The withdrawer: Withdrawers refuse to contribute to the team, usually out of lack of interest, lack of confidence, or inadequate preparation. Some ways to deal with withdrawers include asking them questions, finding out what they are good at and making sure that they are given the opportunity to contribute in that area, and acknowledging their positive contributions.

The monopolizer: Monopolizers dominate discussions by voicing an opinion about everything said, and interrupting or not allowing others to make a contribution. In some cases monopolizers try to impress the team with their skills or knowledge; in other cases,

they try to compensate for a lack of confidence by asking too many (often irrelevant) questions, or trying to answer every question to prove their competence. When they are genuinely knowledgeable, monopolizers can be beneficial because they help to direct the group. When they get disruptive or intimidating, however, they should be interrupted and others drawn into the discussion.

The second model we examine here is the one formulated by communication researcher Meredith Belbin (2000). Belbin constructed a typology of roles of participants in team interactions – the Belbin Inventory. In this, he distinguished nine team roles:

The Plant: These are 'ideas people', innovators and inventors, who provide the foundations from which major developments emerge. They are often eccentric, working alone, and approaching problems in an unconventional way. Although clever and competent, these roles are not good at social communication. As their function is often to generate proposals and solve complex problems, they are needed in the initial stages of a project an/or when a project is failing to progress. One plant in a team is usually enough, since plants tend not to be co-operative but focus more on reinforcing their own ideas and challenging each other.

The Resource Investigator: These are good at communicating, both within and outside the group, negotiating, and exploring links with different contacts. They are generally not a source of original ideas, but are adept at picking up and exploiting other people's ideas. They have a practical inclination, which gives them the skill to find out what is available and how it can be used. Resource investigators are inquisitive and ready to see new possibilities, but they need to remain stimulated and part of an approving team. Their function in a team is to explore and report back on ideas, developments and resources outside their group.

The Monitor Evaluator: These are the 'down to earth' contributors, whose main function is to analyze and evaluate information. They tend to have a high critical thinking ability and capacity for shrewd judgments. They also need a good eye for objectively evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of a situation. A team with a plant and a resource investigator but no monitor evaluator would be at a serious disadvantage, because it is the monitor evaluator that steers the group in practical ways, and helps the members reach hard decisions.

The Coordinator: These are distinguished by their ability to encourage others to work towards shared goals. Coordinators need to be trusting and confident, since they have to delegate duties. They need to detect individual talents and use them productively in the pursuit of shared goals. They should have the ability to manage people and command respect. In teams that have diverse skills and characteristics, coordinators are very important because they can bring together the team's different features for more harmonious and effective cooperation.

The Shaper: These have a directive function and perform the duties of leaders in the team. They tend to be highly motivated with a strong sense of achievement and energy

drive. They have a winner's mentality, and, although they are resourceful in overcoming obstacles, they can also exhibit strong emotional reactions to disappointment and frustration. They do not delve on the maintenance tasks of the group, aiming instead at achieving their objectives and those of the group. They generate action and thrive under pressure, so they can enthuse the members of a team and can be useful in teams where political complications tend to slow the pace. They are well-suited to change, and do not hesitate to take unpopular decisions. As their name suggests, they forge a shape on group discussions and activities, and are the most effective members in guaranteeing positive action.

The Team Worker: These are the most supportive members of a team. Their skills include flexibility, tact, intuition and sensitivity. They are good listeners and are generally popular in the team. The major problem of team workers is indecisiveness: they tend to leave important decisions to others. Their role is to prevent interpersonal conflict within the team and thus allow members to function effectively. They complement shapers, who are not inclined to consider the team cohesion. The presence of team workers in a team improves morale and co-operation.

The Implementer: These are disciplined and practical. Although they can be inflexible, they are systematic, which makes them work for the group's interests. They tend to be reliable and apply themselves to the problem at hand. Implementers tend to do what needs to be done, and they have an eye for relevance.

The Completer-Finisher: These are able to follow-through with projects, and tend to start only what they can finish. Typically, they do not require external stimuli but are self-sufficient and self-motivated. They tend to be intolerant of those who lack perseverance, or exhibit a casual attitude to the project. They tend not to delegate, preferring to complete tasks by themselves, and they generally complete projects by set deadlines.

The Specialist: These have expert knowledge and technical skills in a specific area. They tend to be self-sufficient, lacking interest in others' work. They maintain professional standards and are keen to further knowledge in their field. In a team, specialists provide the knowledge base and command support because they know more about their field than other members, so they are often called upon to make decisions based on their experience. In some teams, every member is a specialist in his/her own fields. In this case, each member combines this role with another role to maintain cohesion.

As was noted also with the previous model, these roles are not always exclusive, and an individual can play more than one in a single group, depending on the situation. Individual characteristics, such as 'personality traits', do play a part in the allocation of roles. However, it is mostly the demands of the project, and contextual factors, such as the hierarchy of the organization, its values, etc, as well as practical concerns, such as time and money, which have the final say in who plays what role.

3. LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a complicated topic that deserves more attention than we can give it in this chapter. Here, we look at some pertinent issues related to leadership, especially as they underlie the functioning and effectiveness of a team.

The distinction between maintenance focus and task focus is pertinent also when it comes to leadership of a team. Maintenance-focused leaders tend to pay attention to the cohesion of the group, ensuring that it remains harmonious while working towards team objectives. They are good at resolving conflict, and can delegate and supervise effectively. Such leaders, however, may be ineffective in some situations, such as when there is strong opposition within the group. Task-focused leaders, on the other hand, are focused on achieving objectives whatever the cost and they can drive change through resistance. They are not too concerned about cohesion or harmonious cooperation, focusing, instead, on achieving results. Their directive skills work best with subordinates rather than equals, and, generally, leading self-motivated people is not their strong point.

Regardless of whether their focus is to maintain cohesion or to initiate tasks, effective team leaders share certain characteristics. According to Qubein (1986), these common characteristics are:

- They value people: they acknowledge the importance and contribution of others.
- They listen actively: they make an effort to understand the needs and desires of others
- They are tactful: they criticize sparingly, constructively and diplomatically
- They give credit: they praise others and their contributions publicly
- They are consistent: they control their personal moods, and are fair in their exchanges with others
- They admit mistakes: they take the blame for errors they committed
- They have a sense of humour: they maintain a pleasant disposition and pleasant manner
- They set a good example: they follow their own regulations.

Like other managers, team leaders can exhibit styles of direction with varying degrees of dominance or control. These styles vary from contexts where the leader enforces his/her decision on team members, to the opposite extreme where the leader listens to all parties and allows for unlimited individual initiative. In many cases the leader's powers and responsibilities are inscribed in the organization's management structure, but, as in most facets of human behaviour, they also depend on individual leader's interpretation of this structure. According to the leadership continuum model first proposed by R Tannebaum and W. H. Schmidt (1973), leadership strategies range from autocratic to laissez-faire, and comprise several steps in- between. The leadership continuum is shown in the following diagram.
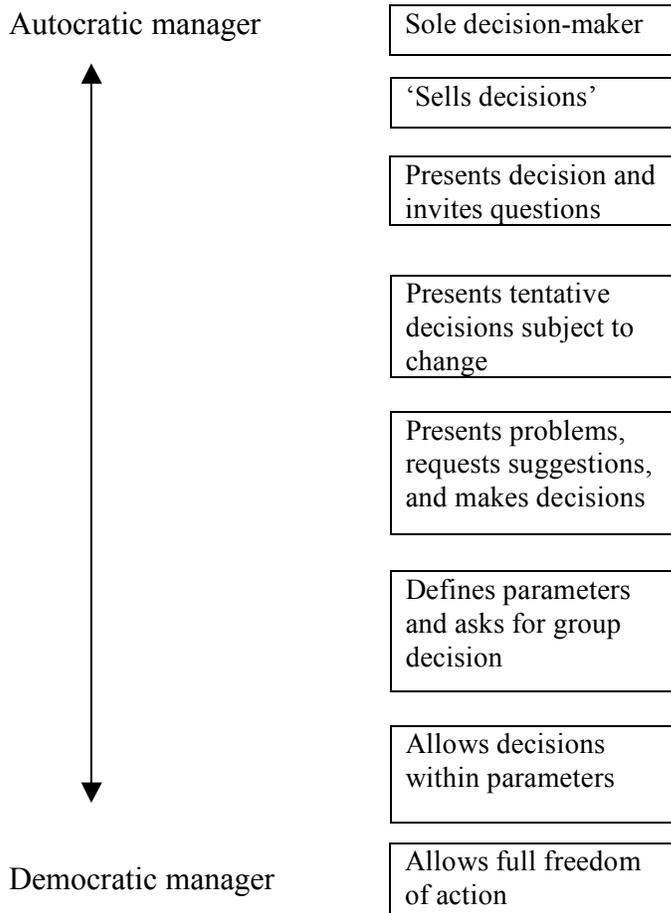
Autocratic manager

	Sole decision-maker
	'Sells decisions'
	Presents decision and invites questions
	Presents tentative decisions subject to change
	Presents problems, requests suggestions, and makes decisions
	Defines parameters and asks for group decision
	Allows decisions within parameters

Democratic manager

Allows full freedom of action

Figure 1: Leadership continuum. Source: Sutherland and Canwell 2004: 175.

4. COLLABORATION

Apart from the leader's role, which is usually assigned, the above described team roles typify individual practices that take place in meetings and discussions. They describe forms of behaviour, usually reflected in language but also in non-verbal communication, that can be exhibited by any team member. Another aspect of teamwork is the formally implemented system for duty allocation, negotiation, delegation of duties, monitoring of progress and feedback; in other words, methods of collaboration.

Three types of collaboration that are commonly used in business and industry contexts are *the sequential, the functional* and *the mix-and-match* (Marsen 2003).

A. Sequential Collaboration

In this type, each department/section in a company, or person in a group for smaller projects, is assigned a specific, non-overlapping, responsibility in the project. For example, in a software company, three departments are sometimes involved in producing the user documentation:

1/ software specialists assemble the material;
2/ communication specialists are in charge of word processing and designing; and
3/ the art and printing department is responsible for publishing the documentation.

In this case, each department must finish its job before passing the material to another department for the next stage.

The sequential type of collaboration can be effective at times, especially when the work of each segment is specialized and each stage is self-sufficient. However, projects completed sequentially take longer than when other methods are employed, and a project manager is often necessary to coordinate the project and to ensure that deadlines are kept, all parties understand requirements, and transitions from one stage to the next are smooth.

B. Functional Collaboration

This type is organised according to the skills or job function of the members. All stages of a project are undertaken concurrently, and all parties can monitor procedures at each stage. For example, a four-person team carrying out a user documentation project for software might be organised as follows:

- A manager schedules and conducts meetings, assists team members, issues progress reports to management, solves problems by proposing alternatives, and generally coordinates efforts to keep the project on schedule.

- A researcher collects data, conducts interviews, searches the literature, administers tests, gathers and classifies information, and then prepares notes on the work.

- A writer/editor receives the researcher's notes, prepares outlines and drafts, and circulates them for corrections and revisions.

- A graphics expert obtains and prepares all visuals, specifying why, how, and where visuals should be placed and designing the document layout. He or she might even suggest that visuals replace certain sections of text.

All parties work on the project at the same time, and interact regularly through meetings and e-mail communication.

C. Mix and match collaboration

In this type of collaboration, team members agree on shared objectives, and then work independently on separate sections of the project by undertaking all tasks. The team members meet at specified times to compare their work and choose the best samples from each other's work. This approach is constructive in smaller scale projects, when team members have similar skills but cannot meet regularly.

A different version of this approach occurs when all members share the same interactive software and can work on the same project concurrently, each contributing according to their own skills which may or may not overlap. Continuing our software documentation example, a mix and match type of collaboration could mean that members from the engineering, communication and art departments have the same software installed in their computers and work on the same documentation project at the same time, without waiting for one department to finish their tasks before passing the project to another department. This would most likely cut costs and reduce time, compared with the sequential model, but it would necessitate that all members work cooperatively, and that project milestones and outcomes are very clearly set out and agreed by all in advance (to reduce the risk of 'you're treading on my toes' symptom).

5. CONFLICT

Conflict is embedded in human relations. It arises when there is incompatibility of orientation between individuals or groups, and it can form in such situations as when people form incompatible goals and behaviours, when resources have to be allocated, and when decisions have to be made. Conflict is associated with:

- Value: underlying values are different. This is arguably the most important and serious type of conflict because values are entrenched in social interaction and behaviour, and are very difficult to change.
- Interests: what promotes one's self-interest opposes another's. For example, when two colleagues compete for the same promotion inevitably some degree of conflict will arise.
- Policy: existing regulations do not reflect current needs. This often manifests in cases where conflict leads to employees' strikes or group protests. This is what happens, for example, when prices increase but salaries remain static, leading to a strike, or when women have achieved breakthroughs in social equality but legislation regulating gender issues remains at a primitive level, leading to demonstrations, or ground breaking legal proceedings. Policy is very closely aligned with value.
- Goals: there is controversy or disagreement about where a project is going. In a project, for example, some members may think the goal is to produce routine results, whereas others may want to produce a radical breakthrough.
- Method: there is controversy or disagreement about how to arrive at the desired outcome. Such conflict may arise when one side has low uncertainty avoidance, and therefore is more optimistic about the future, while the other side has high

uncertainty avoidance and wants more control over a situation, leading them to choose high-risk methods (such as war over negotiation, for instance).

Managed properly, conflict can result in growth because it allows for different points of view to be aired and considered. Managed badly, it can be destructive and costly – in resources and relationships. Groups can suffer from two opposite evils: too little conflict, and too much conflict. A little conflict can be a good thing for change and rejuvenation of outmoded structures and beliefs. A lot of conflict, however, can destroy a project and in serious cases even lead to costly lawsuits and official investigations.

A. AVOIDING CONFLICT: THE GROUPTHINK SYNDROME

Sometimes people think that avoiding conflict at all costs is the best course of action in order to maintain harmony within a group or organisation. This attitude can often lead to a 'sweeping things under the carpet' approach, where serious differences in policy or value are politely ignored until they burst out violently and destructively. Yale sociologist Irving Janis (1982) studied such cases where wrong decisions are made about important matters because the interested parties did not consider options that were outside their established framework. He referred to misplaced conformity or agreement within a group as 'Groupthink' ('group' being for him a collectivity of individuals working together as decision-makers in large organizations).

Janis examined a number of 'fiascoes', historical cases where groups made ineffective decisions because they strived to reach consensus without taking into account possible risks or alternatives. In these cases he observed certain common features pointing to three categories and eight symptoms of group behaviour. These constitute the Groupthink syndrome, described in the table below:

Table 2: GROUPTHINK

Type I: Overestimations of the group

1. Belief in being invincible
The group believes it is invincible, which may lead to excessive optimism and unnecessary risk-taking.

2. Belief in inherent morality
Group members believe that their decisions are inherently moral, and brush away thoughts of unethical behaviour by assuming that they cannot do anything wrong.

Type II: Closed-mindedness

3. Attempts to rationalise about all issues
Group members explain away warnings or threats.

4. Stereotyping
The group stereotypes opponents as being too evil, stupid, or too weak to take seriously.

Type III: Pressures towards uniformity

5. Self-censorship
Group members with doubts censor themselves to preserve the appearance of consent.

6. Belief in unanimity
The group believes there is unanimity on an issue because nobody raises an objection.

7. Direct pressure
Group members apply direct pressure to conform to anyone who tries to question the status quo within the group.

8. Imposing mind-guards
Just as bodyguards protect from physical harm, so some group members set themselves as censors or gatekeepers in order to prevent challenging or threatening information available outside the group from appearing before the group.

Source: adapted from Janis 1982: 174-5.

Janis' findings supported his hypothesis that 'whenever a policy-making group displays most of the symptoms of groupthink, we can expect to find that the group also displays symptoms of defective decision-making' (Janis 1982: 175). Major signals indicating that a faulty decision-making process is at play include:

- The group has not fully considered alternatives
- The group has not clearly examined objectives
- The group has not taken into account the possible risks of their decision
- The group has not re-evaluated alternatives that it rejected at a previous stage of the process
- The group has not conducted a comprehensive information search, and may therefore be ignorant of important issues
- The group has shown prejudice or bias in evaluating the information at hand

- The group has not worked out what to do in an emergency or if their decision proves ineffective.

B. ASSESSING CONFLICT: THE THOMAS-KILMAN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT

Individuals react differently to conflict. In fact, different reactions are necessary to deal with different forms of conflict, different contexts, etc. An influential method of assessing these reactions to conflict was formulated by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, and is known as the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.

Thomas and Kilmann examined individual reactions in situations involving conflict and described their behaviour using two axes, 1) assertiveness, the extend to which the individual attempts to satisfy his/her interests, and 2) cooperativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's interests. They then used these axes to define five modes, or methods, of dealing with conflicts: *competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding* and *accommodating.* No mode is better or worse than another per se; rather, each mode is appropriate in certain situations but inappropriate in others, and successful conflict management depends on knowing which to choose and when. Here are some more details on each mode.

Competing: This mode is assertive and uncooperative. The person pursues his/her own concerns usually at the other person's expense, using whatever power seems appropriate towards this end. Competing may mean standing up for one's rights, defending a position one believes is correct, or simply trying to win. Cases where competing would be appropriate include:

- In emergency situations where decisive action is required
- When unpopular courses of action need to be implemented
- As a safeguard when non-competitive behaviour is exploited

Accommodating: This is the opposite of competing – unassertive and cooperative. The person sacrifices his/her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person. This includes selfless generosity or charity, obeying a command when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view. Cases where accommodating would be appropriate include:

- When one realizes one is wrong
- When the issue is not important to one but important to the other person
- When continued competition would damage one's cause; for example, when one's opinion is outnumbered by the opposite view
- When preserving harmony is especially important

Avoiding: This mode is unassertive and uncooperative. The person does not pursue his/her concerns directly nor does s/he yield to the other person. Rather s/he does not

address the conflict. This might take the form of diplomatically side-stepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. Cases where avoiding would be appropriate include:

- When an issue is not as important as others at one time
- When there is no chance to satisfy one's concerns; for example, in cases of low power or when confronted by a situation where one's sphere of influence is diminished
- When the costs of confronting a conflict outweigh the benefits of resolving it
- When the situation involves high risk and more information is important in assessing the advantages of a decision
- When the issue is symptomatic of a more fundamental issue

Collaborating: This is the opposite of avoiding – assertive and cooperative. The person attempts to work with another person to find a solution that satisfies the concerns of both. It attempts to identify the underlying concerns of both parties and to find an alternative that meets both sets of concerns. This includes exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, resolving some condition that would otherwise have the two parties competing for resources, or confronting each other and trying to find a solution to a problem. Cases where collaborating would be appropriate include:

- When the concerns of both parties are too important to be compromised
- When the objective is to learn by understanding the views of others
- To gain commitment from others by incorporating their concerns in a decision

Compromising: This is intermediate to assertiveness and cooperativeness. The person attempts to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that satisfies both parties. It includes addressing an issue more directly than avoiding, but not exploring this issue in as much depth as collaborating. It could mean exchanging concessions or seeking a middle ground. Cases where compromising is appropriate include:

- When the goals are not worth the effort of the potential disruption involved in being more assertive
- When two opponents are equally committed and equally strong
- When there is time pressure and an expedient solution must be reached

C. CONFLICT IN TEAMS

Some teams are highly effective, while others never seem to get off the ground. When teams are not working well, it can be a very serious matter, costing the organisation money and time. While the reasons that make a team unproductive are not fixed or universal, there are some guidelines regarding what could not be working right that can be used to clarify the situation:

- The team may be lacking the required specialist skills to tackle a project expertly and confidently
- The team may be lacking one or more vital roles (from the roles described earlier in this chapter)
- Members may feel their personal skills are not appreciated and they may lose motivation (often the result of weak leadership or bad management)
- The team may feel their efforts will not be supported by authorities and funding agencies, especially if they are working under budget constraints and/or on obscure or unpopular projects
- A conflict of values or expectations may exist where some team members may expect different results from the project or the team may be expecting different results from the management
- The brief describing the objectives and scope of a project may be unclear, leading to confusion
- Personal conflicts may hinder the achievement of goals. This is especially true of competitive environments where people are not accustomed to working co-operatively.

Managing Conflict in Teams

As it probably has become clear from the preceding discussion, managing conflict is no easy matter. In most aspects of interpersonal communication, contextual factors, such as the setting of the interaction, the background of the participants and the nature of the interaction, are important in pointing to the most appropriate reactions, and conflict management is no exception to this. However, as regards teamwork, which has been our main focus in the last two sections, a general process for managing conflict involves five steps:

1. Define the problem

The definition of the problem is the most important step in finding a solution. In many cases there is low morale and a lack of commitment by team members because there is a problem that has not been voiced or made conscious within the group dynamics. An effective method of discussing the problem that caused this conflict is to describe it in writing. Each conflicting side should describe their perspective on the matter as clearly and as objectively as possible, avoiding 'I said / he said' type criticism. It is also important to avoid generalizations, such as 'they', 'always', 'never', etc, and to determine if the reaction is proportional to the situation. In describing the issue, consider if it had objective grounds to escalate into conflict, or if it is likely to have been caused by misunderstanding. Also examine the history of the situation and the participants: Are there left-over emotions, grudges from a previous event?

2. Analyze the problem

Once the group agrees on the nature of the problem, the next step is to analyze it in terms of size, causes and criteria of evaluation. At this stage, it is important not to succumb to

the temptation of listing possible solutions before having analyzed the problem thoroughly. Before answering the question 'what can be done to solve the conflict', team members should answer 'why is this a conflict?' and 'for whom is it a conflict?'

3. Generate possible solutions

Brainstorming is usually an effective way to generate ideas that could lead to the resolution of the conflict. At this stage, evaluation or nitpicking criticism of ideas should be avoided, and team members should produce as many possible solutions as they can.

4. Evaluate and test the various solutions

After the brainstorming stage, each possible resolution should be examined to ascertain its merits and drawbacks. Factors to consider carefully include if the solutions are likely to work, if they are fair to all, and if they can be implemented easily. This should eliminate the solutions that are not worthwhile and leave a reduced number of options.

5. Choose a mutually acceptable solution

From the reduced number of possible solutions the one that seems to be the most effective can be chosen for a trial period. The best way to articulate this would be, once again, in writing. At times choosing an option is a risky act, with no guarantees that the selected solution will work. However, if the decision was reached by (relative) consensus (while avoiding the traps of Groupthink), all the parties involved will be responsible for testing it and providing feedback.

Effective Listening

Effective listening contributes enormously to group dynamics and conflict resolution. In interpersonal communication, poor listening skills are at fault in many, if not most, cases of misunderstanding.

When working with others, much of the communication that takes place when suggesting, instructing, requesting, criticising, praising and negotiating is non-verbal (as discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter). Listening actively by making a physical and mental effort to understand what someone else is saying engages the whole body, not just ears. It is a way of communicating that signifies:

- I hear what you are feeling
- I understand how you see things now
- I am interested and concerned
- I understand where you are
- I do not wish to judge you or change you

Here are seven tips for active listening:

1. Stop talking – don't be afraid of silence: Many people talk too much because they feel uncomfortable with silence. However, you can't listen if you are talking.

2. Remove noise as much possible. 'Noise' is used in the communications sense of distractions to the unhindered transmission of the message. Therefore, it refers not only to external factors such as street noise, but also other factors, such as excessive heat or cold, and distracting mannerisms. Common distracting mannerisms include clicking pens, shuffling papers, checking clothing or fingernails, and gazing around the room (see the section on non-verbal communication below for more on this). If you need to talk to a team member or colleague about something serious, it is advisable to arrange a meeting in pleasant and relaxed surroundings.

3. Ask open questions which begin with the 5Ws and 1H: what, when, why, where, who and how. This helps to keep the conversation on the topic and to obtain as much information as possible on it. When people answer W and H questions they have to reply in full sentences, and so their replies are more factual than they would be if the questions were of the 'Do you…' type, which elicits, simpler 'yes-no' answers.

4. Be supportive. Let the other person know that you *want* to know what he or she is talking about. It is well attested that most people will talk if they get attention and interest from the listener. Sensing indifference or impatience discourages a constructive response.

5. Respond to feelings. If the situation at hand has an emotional investment by one or all the participants, it is best to acknowledge this. Hidden or 'bottled' feelings may cloud or sabotage the information you require.

7. Summarise to check mutual understanding. A summary ensures that both parties have the same understanding of what has been said, and helps to create closure to an issue or topic of discussion. In business, for example, a summary is formalised in a Memorandum of Understanding listing the points that have been agreed upon in a previous discussion.

6. INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

'Information management' refers broadly to the systematic and deliberate accessing and organizing of the knowledge that all the members of a company possess. The concept behind information management is that tapping into available (but sometimes hidden) mental resources and skills can lead to reaping substantial benefits. The value of information management practices has been aptly captured by an often quoted remark by Lew Platt, former Chief Executive Officer of Hewlett-Packard: 'If Hewlett-Packard knew what it knows, we'd be three times as profitable' (cited in Dearlove 2000: 152).

Several examples have been documented to support the positive effect of information management initiatives. For example, IBM held a brainstorming session with all its employees, in May 2001, called WorldJam. This produced about 6000 ideas suggested by

approximately 52,000 employees. The ideas were recorded in an online archive that can be accessed by staff (Figallo and Rhine 2002: 56-57). Also, a British company set up an interactive voicemail system, called 'what's hot and what's not'. Employees contributed short news items about customers, technology and products, and these could be accessed on cell phones by all company staff (Cook 1999: 103). Finally, Xerox employees who encounter a problem that is not mentioned in product documentation can enter a description and analysis of this problem in a database called Eureka. This database can be accessed by Xerox representatives worldwide and provides valuable assistance in dealing swiftly with product glitches (Kermally 2002: 162-3).

Such initiatives have fuelled an interest in the general nature of information and knowledge, and in how knowledge is communicated in business settings (Davenport and Prusak 2000; Asslani and Luthans 2003). A useful model for analyzing the processes involved in knowledge acquisition was formulated by Takeuchi and Nonaka (2004). This has a spiral pattern, going through four sequences, Socialisation – Externalisation – Combination – Internalisation (SECI). This model is based on a distinction between *explicit knowledge*, that is, knowledge that exists in the public domain, or the external world, and *tacit knowledge*, that is, knowledge that belongs to particular specialist groups or individuals. The model encompasses the following phases involved in knowledge acquisition:

1. Socialisation (tacit-to-tacit): This is what happens when those involved in a project do not have enough insider or specialist knowledge to accomplish the task and need training to acquire this knowledge. An example would be software engineers designing a new program aimed to monitor the heart and general health condition of mountain climbers. Unless the engineers are mountain climbers themselves, they would not be aware of such vital information as clothing, occupational habits and body movements of climbers; and lack of such knowledge would hinder them from designing equipment that would be effective in being portable and in recording accurate data on the health of the climbers. What the engineers would have to do, therefore, would be to obtain information from climbers through interviews, observations, etc. This would be a case of socialisation: a systematic transfer of knowledge by means of interviewing, observation, on-the-job-training, coaching and mentoring.

2. Externalisation (tacit-to-explicit): In this second phase, what starts off as peripheral data becomes central in solving a problem or dealing with an issue. Continuing the above example, having obtained the necessary information from mountain climbers, the engineers are faced with the problem of what material to use for containing their software. They need something light enough to be carried around unobtrusively while at the same time strong enough to withstand extreme changes in temperature (when the users are climbing mountains in very hot or freezing climates). To solve the problem they build virtual simulations and experiment with different materials, they brainstorm ideas, they connect with colleagues in a different department of the company who have worked on similar projects in the past, and they form hypotheses, which they then test. All this

activity represents the externalization phase of the acquisition of knowledge. From the data they gather during this process, the engineers are able to determine the appropriate material to encase their software.

3. Combination (explicit to explicit): In this stage, the knowledge acquired during the previous phases is put to practice, tried out and publicized to allow for revision and integration. The software engineers in our example have now created their software and are combining the new knowledge they have created with the knowledge that already exists. They write an article for a specialist journal and present a paper at a conference, describing what they have accomplished and how this differs from or is similar to other software in related areas. More importantly, they present their product to the mountain climbers who will be using it, and make a trial experiment. They take on board suggestions and criticisms for consideration. This activity represents the combination phase of the acquisition of knowledge.

4. Intrrnalisation (explicit-to-tacit): This final phase of the SECI sequence completes the cycle. The knowledge gained in the previous phases through interaction with others becomes specialist knowledge. The engineers have established an evaluation plan, which will help them to get feedback from the practical applications of their product (this could take the form, say, of meeting twice yearly with the group of mountain climbers over the next two years). Since the product is now in the market, the marketing section of the company have also established an interactive database to obtain feedback from users and retailers. This activity represents the internalisation stage of the acquisition of knowledge.

Information management has evolved since the mid-90s in line with technological developments, mainly because computer technology has allowed new ways of information retrieval, allocation and storage. Databases that store information from across an organization at a central place, Intranet sites and blogs to which a large number of individuals can contribute are all examples of information management schemes.

B. Quality Indicators of Information

Information management, its functioning and effectiveness, is also dependent on the quality of information collected. Gathering and classifying a large amount of information is not enough, or even appropriate, to make this information effective, usable or credible. Evaluating the quality of information, therefore becomes key. Organizational analyst Harold Wilensky (1967) proposed a useful model for evaluating information that has been constructively used by researchers since its formulation. In this model, Wilenski distinguishes six criteria for high-quality information: *clarity, timeliness, reliability, validity, depth*, and *diversity*.

Clarity: Information must be easily understandable by its intended receivers; also enough information must be given to allow receivers to interpret it within a meaningful context. Clarity is defined from the point of view of the receiver, so audience analysis assumes an

important role. In the Challenger example, engineers could have tried to make specialist concepts clear to non-specialist receivers in order to better convey the urgent nature of the situation.

Timeliness: Information must be available when needed, and must be kept up to date. For example, in areas afflicted by earthquakes, the government must have enough information about how to handle such a natural disaster before an earthquake actually occurs, and must receive updates of this information as new scientific findings become available.

Reliability: Information must be accurate, unambiguous and consistent so that those that use it to take action will not be faced with contradictory or vague directives and regulations. Recording sources, double-checking and revising data are important tasks for ensuring reliability.

Validity: Information must be unbiased and closely reflect existing conditions. For example, when statistical analyses are conducted, it is important to ensure the sample population was not selected deliberately to favour particular conclusions that represent the interests of certain groups. Recording sources (e.g. stating where the statistics came from), and justifying hypotheses and conclusions are important tasks in ensuring validity.

Depth: Information must be comprehensive, taking into account all relevant facts, issues and/or and options about the situation. Although this is of course very important in making the information effective, at the same time care must also be taken not to include too much information, as this may result in overload. The challenge here is to gather comprehensive information while maintaining time limits, so that the information is not outdated by the time it is communicated.

Diversity: Information must come from a variety of sources and include different viewpoints and angles. This indicator too must be used with care, keeping in mind that not all sources of information are equally credible or valid. Often trying to gather as much information as possible about a topic can lead to scope creep, where a project becomes expanded out of proportion with its initial objectives. Therefore, a balanced approach to information collection should be sought.

7. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A project in business and industry consists of a series of activities leading to one major goal or purpose. 'Project management' refers to the planning necessary to complete a major project on time, within budget, according to specifications, and with the consultation and consent of all relevant parties. Projects tend to be undertaken by a 'project team', a group of people responsible for managing a project. Projects usually begin with a proposal and end with a completed outcome, and a final report showing how the initial goals were reached or not. During the progress of a project, the team is generally required to submit progress reports at specified times (such as monthly or bi-

monthly), in order to keep management informed of what has been achieved and what still remains to be done.

The components of effective project management are:

Definition: A project is carefully defined as the first step. Aspects of project definition include:

- Problem definition: is the project attempting to solve a problem? For whom is this a problem? How is the problem defined?
- Scope: what issues or topics will the project cover? How much detail will it provide? What are the parameters that project team members have to work within?
- Outcome: what will be the result of the project? For example, if a computer system is being developed, what functions should it perform and to what standard?
- Resources: what advantages do the team have in undertaking the project? Are they highly skilled? Do they have a large budget? Do they have adequate time to complete all the tasks? Is up-to-date technology available to them?
- Constraints: is the budget modest? Is the staff limited, in numbers or in knowledge? Are there tight deadlines? Is there a lack of appropriate technology?
- Risks: what are the possible dangers of the project and what can be done to minimize them?

Planning: Each step in the process is planned before further action is taken. Tasks (activities representing one step towards the completion of a project) undertaken in the planning stage include:

1. Identifying the steps required to complete the project
2. Listing the priorities: What should be done first, second, third?
3. Identifying dependent and independent tasks: Which tasks need to be put aside while other tasks are being completed? Which tasks are urgent, and which may be delayed without damaging the project? Project Managers usually divide tasks into three categories:

   - A critical task must be completed on time for the entire project to be completed on time.
   - A milestone is an event that signifies the accomplishment of a series of tasks during a project. A milestone often signals the ending of a stage or section in the development of the project.
   - A deliverable is a concrete object produced at a specific stages in the project (and usually delivered to a manager of client). Deliverables are used in some types of project management, like, for example, software design and engineering. For example, the systems requirements report, produced near the beginning of the project and describing what the projected software will achieve, is a deliverable.

4. Creating a timeline for task completion and allocating roles to project team members.

Direction: Each project is directed according to a line of responsibility. Project managers are responsible for monitoring and controlling progress and activities. Members of the project team report to managers, who in turn report to upper level management and clients. Team members who are able to meet all the requirements of the project at a minimum cost and on time are highly valued.

Two particular dangers to watch out for in project management are known as **scope creep** and **feature creep**. Both of these can lead to delays, incomplete projects and conflicts within the project team.

Scope creep is exemplified by the tendency of stakeholders to expect more and more from the outcome of the project as the project progresses. For example, businesses and users might expect increasing functionality and performance from a computer system as the process of developing the system unfolds.

Feature creep refers to the tendency to add more and more features and details to the expected product of the project without bearing in mind that the incorporation of these features will take extra time and money. The type of project determines what kind of feature creep may exist. In software design, for example, feature creep leads to the uncontrolled addition of technical features to the software under development. In a personal project, such as writing a university assignment, feature creep might refer to the tendency to obsessively perfect the details rather than the major requirements of the assignment.

Feedback in project management

Team projects need to be monitored to ensure they are progressing satisfactorily. Communication among team members is essential in appraising the development of the allocated tasks, solving disputes and coming up with alternative courses of action when necessary. Unfortunately, feedback is not an easy matter. Personal concerns often cloud objective assessment of a situation, and projects are obstructed because of communication breakdown and individual idiosyncrasy of team members. Communication experts tend to concur on some general guidelines for giving and receiving feedback.

When giving feedback:

- Feedback should not be personal. All critical comments should be focused on behaviour within a professional context, not on personal aspects.

- Positive remarks should be included, and specific examples that are relevant to the project aims should be given.

- Feedback should be given soon after the particular situation, but at a time when it is likely to be received well. In many cases, if a problematic situation is allowed to continue for a long period, it might be very difficult to correct it later.

- Feedback should come in small doses and should focus on the main points. Commenting on everything that may be unacceptable in a situation can be counterproductive and may be perceived as hostile.

- In oral feedback, body language and tone of voice should be consistent with verbal comments. For example, praise should be accompanied by appropriate eye contact and tone of voice.

When receiving feedback:

- Time should be given between the feedback and the response. Impulsive responses are often not well thought out and, therefore, inappropriate. Care should also be taken to avoid defensive responses:

* Diverting: "I think that many would say..."
* Explaining: "That's because..."
* Rejecting: "Yes, but..."
* Discounting: "Gee, I didn't think you'd take this so seriously..."
* Intellectualising: "The premises of your argument are conditional on…"
* Attacking: "Who are you to make such comments..."
* Whining: "If only I had more time, I'd..."

- It is important to understand clearly what the feedback is about and to ask for explanations when the feedback is unclear.

- It is also important, in cases where criticism is excessive and expectations unfairly demanding, to indicate that the point has been taken and no further comment is necessary ('enough is enough').

8. NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

We end this chapter with a short discussion on non-verbal communication – communication that does not rely on words to convey meaning. Communication specialists generally agree that a significant part of the meanings we impart in interpersonal interactions are produced by paralinguistic signs, such as intonation and body language. There is also general consensus that people tend to remember visual signs more than they remember verbal signs. Such considerations make paying attention to one's non-verbal signs vital for effective interpersonal communication. Non-verbal communication (NVC) takes place in different perceptual categories, including:

- Facial expression
- Gestures
- Posture and movement (kinesics)
- Physical contact or positioning (proxemics)
- Clothes, hairstyles and general appearance
- Non-verbal aspects of language, such as tone and pitch of voice

Before discussing this any further, it should be emphasized that the meaning attached to non-verbal signals is to a very large extent culture-specific. Gestures, colours and proximity expectations differ from culture to culture. For example, the human face is capable of around 250,000 different expressions (Birdwhistell 1970: 8), and not all have conventional menaings in all cultures. Some facial expressions, however, are considered to have similar meanings internationally because they are associated with emotive responses that have evolved as part of the genetic make-up of the human species. These expressions reflect the 'universal emotions' happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust.

Other than these emotions, cultural diversity produces a whole range of non-verbal signs and their associations. The following widespread observations are taken from the Western cultural context and relate especially to professional interactions:

- Clothing expectations often accompany the notion of professionalism. For example, research has shown that medical patients expect their doctors to dress formally in suits, or in white jackets (if in a hospital situation). It appears that patients would not approve of, or trust, a doctor dressed in jeans or casual attire, regardless of the doctor's qualifications (Preston 2005). Also, in many corporate settings dress codes are part of performance, and an employee who does not follow these codes would get lower performance ratings, regardless of the quality of their work (Pachter 2002).

- Eye contact is an important sign of respect and attention. Looking at someone in the eyes gently (as opposed to staring) when they are talking generally displays willingness to listen and interest in what the person has to say.

- Eyebrows are expressive in conveying emotion: fully raised eyebrows indicate disbelief; half-raised eyebrows indicate surprise; half-lowered eyebrows indicate puzzle or worry; fully-lowered eyebrows indicate anger (Argyle 1983: 33).

- Giving affirmative head nods when one is listening tends to be a sign of empathy and understanding. Gentle nods also confirm that one is attentive.

- When listening to someone while sitting, the most effective position is sitting upright (not slumping on the chair) with a slightly forward bend. Similarly, when listening to someone standing up, a slight forward bend, and arms resting on the side indicate openness and attention to what the person is saying.

- Body movements and gestures that are commonly seen as blocking the flow of communication include keeping arms crossed (indicating a defensive attitude), putting arms to hips (indicating aggression), standing with a slight backward bend (indicating surprise or aloofness), and putting one's hands on one's chin while one's eyes wander around the room (which indicates boredom).

- A low, well-modulated and relaxed voice inspires confidence. The opposite occurs if the voice is shrill, loud, too soft or monotone.

A technique for gaining more control over how one appears to others is to become conscious of one's facial expressions (maybe by practicing different expressions in front of a mirror). Actors, for example, learn to project emotions on their face more strongly than what their real reaction would show – sometimes what may feel in one's mind like an exaggerated grimace actually may not manifest outwardly this way.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. From your reading of this chapter, what would you say are the organisational problems that the following statements signify? Some statements may indicate more than one communication problem.

- "Our team could tell you how to achieve this in half the time and cost, but if this became public, they'd probably dismantle the team".

- "I could have told management this would happen, but I didn't think they would listen, and I wasn't asked anyway".

- "There's a better way to do this, but I doubt the project manager would want to learn about it".

- "The design team originally made this suggestion, and it eventually made millions for the company. But the design team got nothing out of it".

- "I didn't know this was the correct procedure".

2. Conceptualise a team project in your area of expertise or interest. Then, taking the point of view of the project leader, describe the skills and abilities you would want your team members to have. After doing this, take the point of view of a team member and describe the skills and abilities you would expect from your leader.

3. Describe a situation from experience or from research where conflict was beneficial to growth, and a situation where it was detrimental. Discuss the differences between the situations, and outline some measures that could have been taken in the negative situation.

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