6 Keeping Your Beast Effective

You can hire and build a first class team, but you have to work to keep that team effective. In this section we're going to explore techniques to master productive communication, and ways to determine the optimal composition of your teams. We'll also examine what is at the root of an effective team, and how to use those roots as the foundation on which your team can grow.

Master Effective Communication

Communication generally goes in three directions: up, down, or sideways. In order to effectively communicate, you must be able to take information from any direction and send it out in any direction.

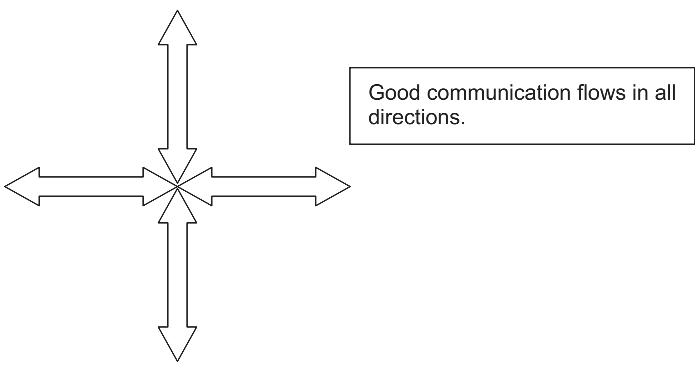

Figure 15:
Communication Flow

Sounds simple? Not so. Before you set out to be the company's best communicator, be sure you are thinking about three things:

- What is the content of the message, and how is it likely to be received?
- Who needs to know this information, and who does not need to know?
- What is the best way to communicate the information?

Inward Communication

Everyone interprets information in terms of how it affects them

Let's take an example. You've just been told that a major contract has been signed. This is good news. Everyone will be happy to hear this, right? Maybe – maybe not. Remember, people are most interested in how the information affects them personally. As a manager, you may have a more global perspective. Or, you may also be thinking in terms of how this news will affect your own job. A new contract has been signed, which means guaranteed work for the next year. No layoffs! That's great news to you as a manager, and you're sure your people will also be happy.

But, what if they weren't even thinking about layoffs? What if their major concern has to do with too big a workload and the number of hours they will have to work to take on this new project? Theirs is a completely different perspective. While you think you have only good news to convey, remember your audience. They may have other concerns. It is always best to try to anticipate these concerns and address them when you present information. Let's face it though. There are a lot of concerns that you will not think about. In this case you need to be sure you provide adequate time, and an open environment for these concerns to be aired and addressed.

Remember Your Audience

Downward communication can be tricky. The most important thing to consider is how your audience will receive the information. When you present any kind of information, particularly if it's unexpected, people will be looking to you to see what you think of it. Your enthusiasm with the new contract will help to convince them that you're presenting good news. If you stutter around for a while and express the information with concern about schedules and headcount, that's how it will be received. This is the time to show your maturity and present the information positively and honestly. You will always have concerns about any news, but you don't need to make those concerns public unless it is the correct time to let people know they should be worried too.

There are also cases when you receive information from your management that shouldn't be passed down the chain. That's part of your job, too. While you're always loyal to your people, there are often confidential issues that belong at your level and no lower. Let's say you were just told the quarter revenues of your publicly traded company are significantly below estimates. Layoffs were discussed as a means of reducing expenses. Should you tell your people? Probably not yet. If you're not sure, ask your boss. Respect information like this.

Open Doors

My door is always open, unless it's closed

What about incoming communication? You want to be sure each one of your people has a communication path to you. You can do this via the fabled "open door policy," but that is often a term used by people who are notorious for keeping their doors the very opposite of open. I have found that people are much more reluctant to bring an item (particularly a problem item) to me in my office than they are to spill it out when I'm sitting next to them in the lab. The casual environment is more comfortable.

If one of your people is having a problem with a developer, by the time they come into your office to tell you about it, it's really a big problem. If, on the other hand, you are available in a more casual environment; in their cubical/office, in the lab, or in the coffee room, they will feel more free to talk to you and will bring up the subject much sooner. This allows you to address the problem situation before it escalates. Think about it. If you're taking a problem to your boss, the formal office environment is equal to making a formal complaint. Gee, it really isn't that bad; maybe you'll just let it wait for a while …

Don't Overreact!

One very important thing to consider is how you're going to react to information you receive. Sometimes people just want to complain and don't want any particular action from you. Everybody needs to blow off steam now and then. I much prefer that they do that with me than to everyone they meet in the hallway. I often ask people what they'd like me to do about the situation. Often the answer is, "Well, actually I don't want you to do anything yet. I just wanted you to be aware of the problem." Great. I can do that. Now I know there's a potential issue so I can keep an eye on the problem, and they know I am there to help if the situation doesn't get rectified.

You do not want to be the person no one talks to because you'll overreact to a situation. I worked with a CEO who felt it was his duty to react (more like blow up) over any issue that came to his attention. It reached the point where the guys wouldn't even go in the bathroom if he was in there for fear he'd ask how things were going. That's not the environment you want to accidentally create.

Outward Communication

Show support without showing distrust

Outward communication is also an area you need to monitor. If you have project leads working for you, can you trust them to go to the project meetings to represent your department? Can they handle a barrage of questions if the project is having schedule or budget problems? You want to be available to back up your leads in tricky situations. If you think the lead is likely to attract unfriendly fire in a meeting, you may want to go with them. Explain why you're going so they don't think it is because you don't trust them. It's often a good idea to review what will be presented, and ask if they'd like you to go with them. That shows your support without giving the impression of distrust.

Generally, anything above project level communication should go through you. That way you can be sure your department is presenting a consistent face to the world, and that policies and procedures which are implemented will work across all projects. If you're going into a policy discussion that directly affects only one project but has far-reaching implications, include your project lead in the meeting too. They will learn about policy decisions, they'll be able to apply the decisions to their project, and they'll see the other factors that have to be considered regarding other projects. Remember, the faster you train your leads to handle more issues, the sooner you can spend your days sitting with your feet on your desk.

Beware of the Grapevine

Respect and never, ever underestimate the grapevine

Don't forget about all-powerful casual communication, sometimes known as the grapevine. People talk. Sometimes, one of the unfortunate byproducts of getting cross-functional teams working together is that they will also talk about "stuff". Work stuff. All the better, you think? But what if you had just discovered a catastrophic bug late in the testing cycle and you're working on how to present it to your management. You really wouldn't want them to find out about it via your person who found the bug, who told their buddy in support, who told their manager, who blew up because it is the same type of bug that occurred in the last release. This incensed manager then called your manager, who was completely blind-sided. Yow!

This stuff happens. Believe me though, the last thing you want to do is put a gag order on people. That usually has two negative byproducts. One, they talk about the gag order, immediately identifying you as the withholder of information; and two, they still talk about what they're not supposed to – because now it is more fun. It's much better to get word to your management as quickly as possible if something bad has happened, because nothing remains a secret for long in any organization. The good part about the grapevine is that sometimes you'll receive information more quickly this way than you would through formal channels. Respect the grapevine; use it when you need to, yet beware of it at the same time.

Creating Optimal Project Teams

In order to create optimal teams, we have to know a few things. How many teams will we need? Who can lead those teams? Leads should lead, but many do not. You need to train them how to do it, and then let them try it.

What is the most efficient structure within the organization? Any sizable department will contain subdivisions – official or not. These subdivisions, or project teams, need to be formed because they are needed for real work. You want to be sure that the team structure facilitates doing the work. Don't try to fit the work into the structure. It will help you later if you don't make false project divisions just because you have idle leads.

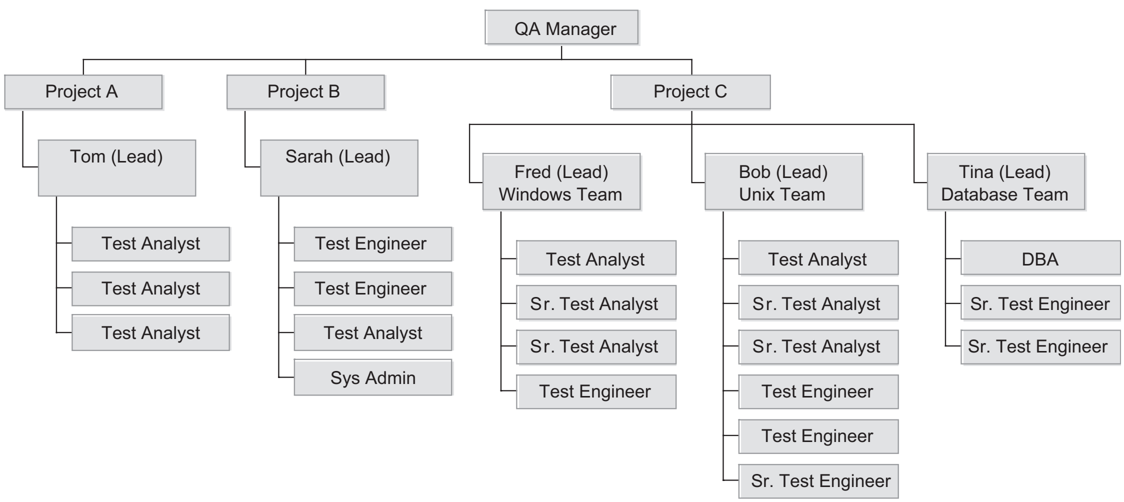

Figure 16:
Sample Project Teams

If we look at the example of a department with several projects, we can see various ways to partition the work. For Project A and B, we need single teams, each with a lead. Project C is much bigger and more diverse. In this case, I have leads handling the different technologies within the project. I might also want to have one lead in charge of the entire project, or, as in this case, I'm going to manage it myself. There is a lot of flexibility in how to create your project teams. You have to work with the projects and people that you have, trying to match the skills with the opportunities.

When promoting leads, it is beneficial to make clear that a lead position is transitive depending on the project allocations. By defining the lead position as an opportunity position, you've built maximum flexibility into your team. As projects and subprojects come and go, you can apply your leads effectively – matching skills and experience to best meet the goals of your company. It also can help with inflated ego problems if your leads know they may be a lead on this project, but they may be a senior tester working under another lead on the next project.

How Many Teams Do You Need?

Defining how many teams are required is one of the most difficult and critical tasks you will face as a manager. A wrong decision here will descend you into the hell of projects running amuck, unmotivated and ineffective people, and unhappiness which may lead to mutiny within the organization. What do you need to consider when making project teams? First of all, how many distinct projects do you have? Distinct projects can be defined as projects with different deadlines and different human or hardware/software resources. How long do these projects last? Or, more realistically, how long are they scheduled to last? How "big" are the projects? "Big" can be defined as the amount of code, number of configurations, number of people, amount of equipment, schedule, and relative importance of the project.

The Art of Delegation

You may have clearly defined and sized projects, but before you put together your project teams you need to be sure you will have someone to lead them. Are your leads capable of taking over a project team or two? Can you effectively delegate to your leads? To know this, you need to think about your comfort level. What does your personal involvement need to be? You may have someone you can delegate work to, and you may be comfortable in doing so. But, there may be an expectation within the project team that you will be personally involved. And what do you do in this case? Delegate. And go to whatever project meetings you need to attend until the comfort level with the new lead is established. You owe them the opportunity.

Creative Team Organization

Be sure each individual is adequately managed

Once you have answered these questions, you'll know how many project teams you need and how many you can create. Unfortunately, those numbers won't necessarily match, but that's reality. It is still good to know how many project teams you should have, even if you can't make that many because you don't have enough people or equipment or leaders. In addition to the project method for creating teams, you may also have some service-oriented teams who assist across projects. These may include performance specialists, domain experts, and utility testers who hop from project to project based on workload. Maintaining flexibility is one of the most important aspects to consider when creating your teams.

When you are creating your organizations within your organization, be sure that each individual in your group will be adequately managed – receiving enough attention to meet their needs and yours. Ensure that the information flow is streamlined for efficiency. Too many levels of hierarchy result in too many chiefs in too many meetings. Your ample quantity of chiefs may find the need to create more meetings to justify their existence.

More leaders may equal more meetings

Be sure your group has the right number of leaders, and that the right people are assigned to them. This means you have to know your leads before you assign people to them. You can have a great engineer and a great lead, but they might not be good together – one could be a very independent worker, while the other could be a very hands-on worker. Our industry has sometimes created environments where the prima donna is allowed to flourish. You'll want to be careful not to let this mindset fester in your organization, or you will be setting yourself up for some long term problems. So, while it is only intelligent to try to group people into effective groups where they are comfortable, don't cripple your organization by catering to problematic individuals with unreasonable wants. Professionals should work together professionally, and sometimes they need to be reminded.

Let Your Leads Lead

Allow your lead to evolve

As mentioned earlier, I assume a lead will have some role in personnel management. You may want that responsibility to evolve over time. If your lead is new or inexperienced, consider giving them project responsibility without personnel responsibility. This provides a good training ground with less risk. People are more amenable to a team assignment if their administrative manager is not changed. As soon as administrative reporting is changed, people become concerned about their performance review and their career plans. By not changing administrative reporting, you can supply continuity in their career growth plans while allowing your people to work on a variety of projects.

Allow your lead to grow into the role. The transition will occur naturally if the ability is there. There will be less anxiety for the team members if the leader is not forced upon them. By easing in the transition there is less anxiety for the lead, and they won't have to face undeserved opposition. People tend to resist change. Try not to force your lead into that resistance. Conversely, the lead may also feel insecure in the new position. This sometimes results in their demanding more authority and control; a demand that immediately causes resentment, which in turn makes them feel more insecure. By creating a safe environment for the lead where they are accepted, you have launched them into the opportunity in the best possible way.

What happens if you have an accelerated schedule, and you need a lead for a project right now? You don't have time to let the lead evolve into the position. Reality is such a pain, isn't it? You need to accelerate the lead's acceptance. You can do this by trying not to immediately assign personnel responsibility, thus working around the possible resistance that people may have to the change in administrative reporting. Give your lead opportunities to build rapport. Let them bring in the bagels each week. Let them tell people good news about the project. You can also help your lead succeed by making sure the schedule and manpower allocation is correct. If there's bad news to deliver to the team, do it yourself. Don't make the lead be the bad guy, and don't put them in a position where they have to defend you – that's tricky stuff which has to wait until they have more practice.

Most importantly, stay close to your leads. Support them, and don't let them fail. If they fail, so do you.

Back to Our Roots

What is at the root of an effective team?

- People know what they're doing – they have the technical capabilities and people skills necessary to get the job done effectively.
- People enjoy what they're doing – people like to come to work each day and are enjoying their daily tasks and their overall project assignments.
- People want to do what they are assigned to do – they feel that their current tasks are what they should be doing. Their career is advancing according to their plans, and their work is facilitating their long-term goals. This is discussed in depth in Chapter 11 – Growing Your Staff.
- There is no internal strife – the members of your department get along.
- Life is wonderful, and the entire company gets along… – hey, it might happen!

Well, maybe not the last one, but certainly the first four are factors that will make for an effective team for a long time. Write these down and stick them on your office wall. You will want to refer back to this list when the schedules explode and/or people quit. Remember, if you ever get to the place where each of these items holds true, you can sit all day with your feet on your desk and count the ceiling tiles.