**Collaborating in a Pandemic: Coordination through Adaption and Information Sharing**

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The COVID-19 pandemic and our response to it has changed the way we work together, threatening the sustainability and utility of organizations by disrupting work processes related to collaboration, information sharing, and technology. The work that organizations do and the outcomes they offer to the market ultimately depend on people working together, whether in formal teams or more organically structured collaborations. People share knowledge and other resources, combining disparate ideas and resources to achieve innovation, fulfill goals, and deliver products and services to end users. As a result of the pandemic, much of the workforce transitioned rather abruptly to a new and often virtual reality, sometimes relating to our coworkers and clients through a shield of personal protective gear, and for many of us a shift to frequent online meetings and other electronic communication with our work teams.

Both extant research and practice offer insights into processes for collaboration and sharing information resources that can work through technology to influence the effectiveness of collective work. Classic work on group dynamics and teamwork can be useful for organizations striving to adjust to our current conditions (e.g., Hackman, 1987; Salas, Shuffler, Thayer, Bedwell, & Lazarra, 2015). More recent research in areas of team adaptation, knowledge networks, and design teams may be helpful in adjusting to our current challenges. For example, my colleagues and I have investigated how knowledge cues influence team adaptation processes (Rico, Sanchez-Manzanares, Gibson, & Clark, 2019), how we share information (Graff & Clark, 2018a), the importance of recognizing the individual unshared elements in team networks (Espinosa & Clark, 2014), and the use of appropriate coordinating technology in virtual environments (Clark & Espinosa, 2008). Although further study and experience will be needed to ascertain the optimal manner of achieving collaborative work goals, each of these provide nascent guidelines and potential direction for further investigation.

**COLLABORATIVE PROCESS**

The research literature is rich with findings which reveal and prescribe factors associated with high performing teams, including development of a strong shared identity and collective understanding, through which they accomplish shared tasks and goals (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social network research, such as my colleague and I have conducted (Espinosa & Clark, 2014) demonstrates, however, that collaborative work also relies also on unshared individual resources including workers’ knowledge, needs and interests (Espinosa & Clark, 2014). Therefore collaboration must also consider and benefit each individual in order to be successful. This is consistent with Hackman’s (1987) definition of team performance as going beyond simple task fulfillment, to also include member well-being and likelihood of future willingness to collaborate. This expanded definition of collaborative success may increase in importance during a pandemic; while there are certainly tasks to be completed, there are also increased human costs of adjusting to changes beyond work and coping with the stress that these produce.

As much of our coworker interaction moves online during the current pandemic, these insights can be useful reminders to engage in relatively simple practices that emphasize shared goals and identity along with individualized consideration which may increase likelihood of motivation and continued willingness to collaborate. Employees often report that companies do not clearly articulate goals to their work unit, particularly in terms of how these connect to organizational strategy. The relatively lean online interface may serve as opportunity for companies and managers to improve on goal clarity. For instance, clarifying the critical goals and tasks – what needs to be accomplished by teams during the pandemic, and what can be eliminated – can serve not only to increase efficiency but also to demonstrate understanding of the challenges that others may be facing in this time. Recognition of individuals can be more directly included as well simply by, for instance, asking coworkers to share their challenges and feelings before starting online meetings. We can also interject some levity in an otherwise potentially monotonous online medium through activities such as giving a team spirit award for the most creative virtual background image or other low-cost variations that build the unique identity of a team.

**ADAPTING & SHARING INFORMATION, & COMMUNICATION MODE**

Teams are especially suited to serve as an important mechanism for organizations that seek to change the nature of their work in response to environmental demands. My colleagues and I have outlined how this occurs through the ability of teams to optimize internal adaptation processes for dealing with novel situations (Rico, Gibson, Sanchez-Manzanares, & Clark, 2020). We further specify that this adaptation process involves comparing a team’s existing understanding with their unfolding situation, necessitating varying communication modes to achieve success (Rico, Sanchez-Manzanares, Gibson, & Clark, 2019). While the response to familiar situations occurs through implicit coordination, where team members share a common understanding and can engage in practiced routines, less familiar situations require more explicit coordination such as direct communication.

It has long been understood that communication, rather than simply being a transfer of information from one person to another, is a more nuanced process that must take into account perceptions of the communicant and the intended recipient, as well as characteristics of the mode of sharing, which may be relatively lean in an online environment. A stream of research on communication modes in design teams suggests that the manner in which we structure information can significantly influence the understanding by the recipient and utility of the interaction. For instance, my work with colleague Daniel Graff found that the use of narrative descriptions, visualizations, and metaphors to communicate ideas in teams may be more effective for increasing recipient understanding that mere data sharing (2018a). This implies that online meetings, perhaps especially workshops or educational courses, should incorporate stories, data visualization such as charts or sociograms, and context-laden terms to achieve shared understanding or learning. Our continued research in this line demonstrates that the use of analogies – terms which link unfamiliar information to that which is known – increases cross-understanding among team members (Graff & Clark, 2018b) and may be effectively measured from the perspective of the recipient, rather than from how well the speaker intended the message to come across (Graff, Meslec, & Clark, 2020). Cross-understanding in turn promotes not only task accomplishment, but also heightened shared identity (Huber & Lewis, 2010) which may contribute to team cohesion, resiliency, and continuity operation.

**COORDINATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY**

For work that requires collaboration – integrating knowledge and effort in order to achieve its goals – it seems clear that we must find appropriate technology to support interaction. Online colleagues need to adapt their understanding to emerging situations and share information in rich formats when complex ideas are being shared. This may call for “cameras-on” interaction using platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard Collaborate, or Skype. My colleague Alberto Espinosa and I discuss the many factors which may add to the burden of online teams – in addition to task-related understanding, teams operating virtually may also face boundaries with regard to geography, culture, time zones, and more (Clark & Espinosa, 2008). Teams should also take time to recognize individual characteristics and challenges, and reserve space for self and others to operate individually when desired. Coworkers should be explicit in their communication in order to account for the relatively lean information environment online, whether written, oral, or visual. Simple changes may improve coordination, understanding, and performance, such as specifying subjects in email headings, sharing agendas for online meetings, and constructing desired action outcomes for all online interactions – whether productivity or promoting social relations among colleagues.

**FORWARD**

In spite of the serious challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us also recognize the opportunity inherent in the crisis to modify our modes of work collaboration for a sustainable future. Organizations should create and support contexts where team members can engage in collaboration processes that build identification as well as understanding, gives space for adaptation, and supports information sharing through rich communication modes on appropriate technological platforms. Building on our understanding of these areas, organizations can achieve continued success while optimizing the experience of those whose interaction builds value for our society. If carefully considered, the lessons learned from this challenging period may yield more effective collaborative processes and structures for future organizations.

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