

MACHINE DESIGN

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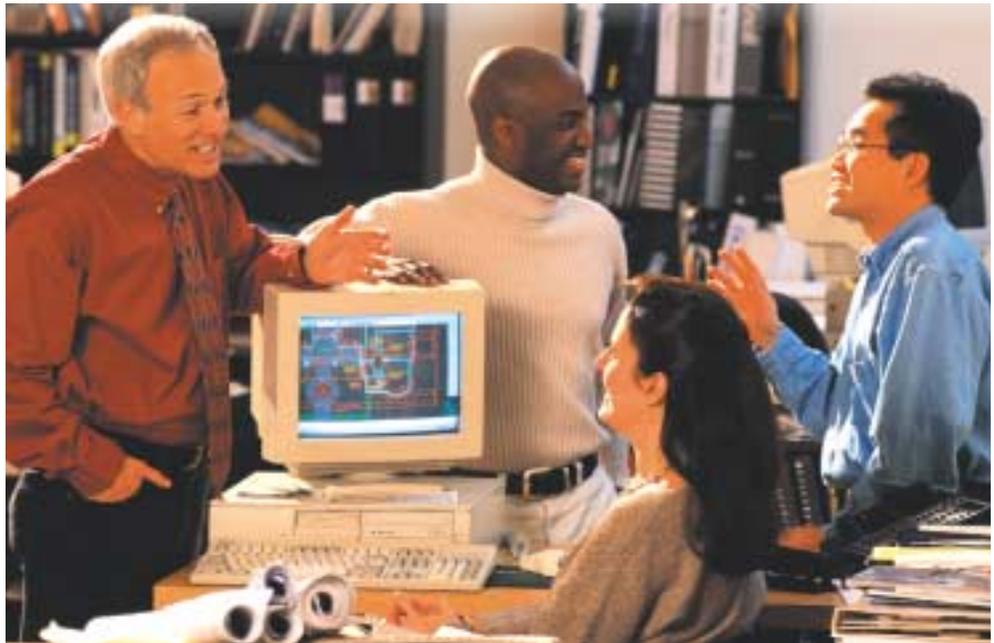
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Communication holds global teams together

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Far-flung development teams need well-defined rules for effective communication

In the not too distant past, members of product-development teams all worked in the same building. Now, teams consider themselves lucky if their members are only spread around a single city. If they're not so lucky, critical members are working on different continents. The key to achieving peak performance with dispersed teams is to maintain good lines of communication. This often requires special tools and skills that teams often lack.



Communication breakdowns

Almost everyone who has been on a global team or who has studied such teams agrees: Global teams are more difficult to manage effectively than colocated teams. They also agree that communication is key to keeping teams together and on track. Here are some of the stumbling blocks teams face due to poor communications:

Commitment. Dispersed team members do not feel as connected or committed to the team. They tend to let local priorities, which appear more real, take precedence. The phrase "out of sight, out of mind" definitely applies.

Trust. People naturally trust those they see and work with

every day. For example, have you ever distrusted someone you had never met, and then felt more comfortable with him or her after meeting them for lunch?

Time zones. Communication problems between team members are directly proportional to the number of time zones that separate them. If it is only a couple of zones, teammates will be in their offices earlier or later than one another, but their workdays still overlap enough to allow phone calls. If the distance stretches to nine or twelve time zones, workdays don't overlap at all, and e-mail and voice-mail must be used.

Language. This is an especially difficult one for those in the U.S. to appreciate, because English is slowly becoming the world lan-

guage. We expect others to speak English. This puts those for whom English is a second language at a disadvantage. This is especially true for Asians because their languages are so much more different from English than European languages. Many Asians are also concerned with saving face if they do not understand something. They are hesitant to ask questions that would reveal their ignorance, thus widening the communication gap.

Culture. We think of culture being a national issue, but there are also cultural differences between companies and professions that complicate the communication, commitment, and trust factors.

As a team becomes more dispersed, more of these factors come

into play and they become more important. Consequently, leading global teams is more difficult than leading national ones, which, in turn, is tougher than leading metropolitan teams.

Communication tools

Countless tools are available these days to help dispersed teams stay in close communication. They include e-mail, voice mail, video and teleconferencing, groupware, and various aids to communication and decision making. No single tool is a panacea. Each works best in a particular niche. Some, like phone calls or face-to-face meetings, are called synchronous and provide real-time communication. Others, such as e-mail or voice mail, are asynchronous with an inherent delay between sending and receiving. Synchronous media usually provides higher quality, faster communications. But when dealing with large time differences, asynchronous tools can yield advantages.

A similar distinction can be made between communication methods that leave a record, like e-mail, and those that don't. A record isn't always preferable. Many people will clam up if they know they can be quoted later.

Each time you want to communicate, think explicitly about what you want to achieve and use the communication tool that fits best. Resist using methods with which you're most comfortable.

Teams should have several communication technologies at their disposal, and the proper training and support to use them.

Rules for communication

Every communication method a team uses should have its own rules of use, often known as protocols. Consider voice mail. Its protocols could include:

- When senders can expect a response.
- What to do if you cannot provide all the information requested in the voice-mail, or you can't provide it quickly enough.

- How should senders identify themselves, and how and when can they be reached.

- What to do if you think the message being sent may be misunderstood.

- What to do if you don't understand a message you received.

Such issues seem quite basic, even self-evident. However, not establishing these basics is precisely the reason why projects suffer delays and miscommunication. But just procuring a voice-mail system does not establish protocols. It is a critical step that gets overlooked in the operating manuals.

Each team should establish its own protocols for all of its communication tools. This fits the protocols to the project. For example, most teams set up a protocol addressing the maximum delay between when a message is sent and when a response is sent. Depending on the nature of the project, teams may want to specify different delays for working hours and weekends. Teams writing their own protocols also build ownership and understanding of them, which leads to quicker acceptance and much wider observance.

E-mail protocols are likely to be similar to those for voice mail, with a few additional items. For example, consider requiring a subject line and specifying the project name, task number, or module name.

To go one step further in instilling effective communication practices, teams can adopt techniques used by the world's navies. They have been using electronic messaging for years, often under time-critical, life-threatening conditions. Consequently, they have established practices that improve written communications. For example, it is common in naval messages that:

- All requested actions appear only in the final paragraph, not sprinkled throughout the message.
- Only pertinent sentences from previous messages are quoted, not the long, complex threads that ap-

pear in today's e-mails that tend to hide critical facts.

Face-to-face is still best

The moments when some or all of the team members are in one place are scarce. Such time is a valuable asset for dispersed teams. Make sure the team gets as much of this time as they need, and use it wisely.

Face-to-face discussions are best in terms of speed and quality of communication, especially for abstract, squishy subjects and sensitive personnel issues. It is invaluable for building trust among team members and gaining commitment toward common goals. Most of these opportunities are at the beginning of a project, when you are trying to develop trust among team members, resolve controversial issues such as product specifications and the team's working approach, and get team members' commitment to these items.

Consequently, if you can get any face-to-face time for your team, use it for project initiation. The more you invest in initial face-to-face time, the greater the dividends it pays later. And if you can get a team facilitator at any time during the project, employ one here.

Sometimes it is impossible to get teams together at the start of a project. If that's the case, do your best to colocate as much of your team as possible. You may find there are members spread around one site that can be clustered together at that site. And get together those players who need to work closely, such as designers and manufacturing engineers, for at least a few days to weld this critical link.

Overcoming other barriers

Cultural differences on global teams are often mentioned as hindrances to clear, concise communication, but little is said regarding what to do about it. It's important to remember that cultural differences will always exist. What's more, they are basically an asset.

They are usually not something that should be changed, even if it were possible. Cultural diversity gives the team different points of view, alternative means to solve problems, and a variety of strengths to offset weak spots.

But cultural differences *do* provide additional challenges for the team. You can start sorting them out by recognizing the three kinds of cultures:

Functional. Engineers, for instance, reason differently, react differently, and are motivated differently than marketers. And any inherent differences have been reinforced over time through training and exposure to other like-minded people.

Organizational. Each company and organization has its own unique style. Apple and IBM, for example, might make similar computers, but their employees have developed quite different values

and behaviors. An Apple employee would probably be uncomfortable at IBM, and vice versa.

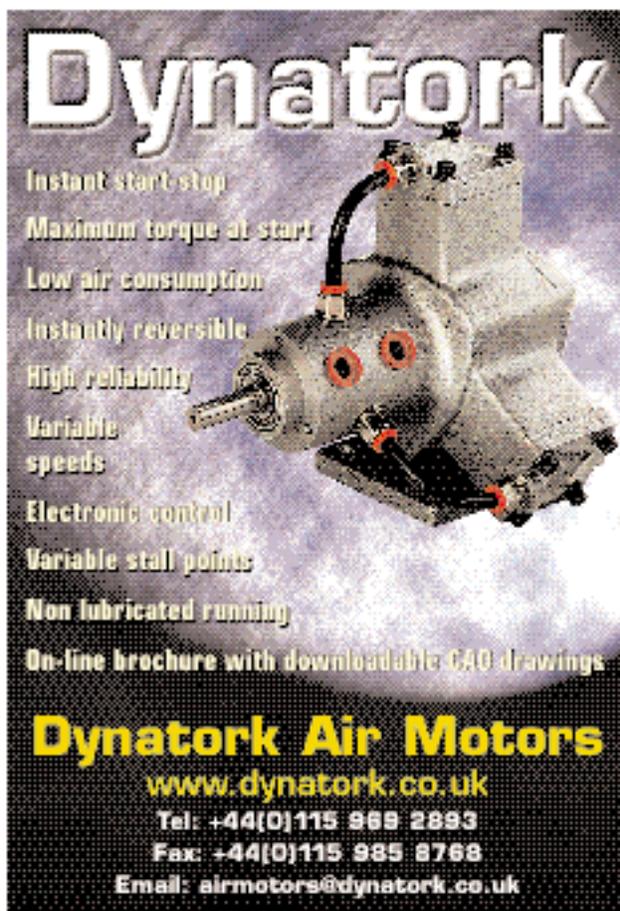
National. Different countries have developed different styles of human interaction too. For instance, in most Western countries, especially the U.S., the individual stands out. Compare this with East Asian countries, where the group is dominant and consensus is revered.

Team leaders should try to understand the functional, organizational, and national characteristics of each team member and use these characteristics to strengthen the team and affirm the individual. Understanding these differences helps improve communications. For example, while analyzing e-mails from a particularly delay-

prone team several years ago, I ran across a message from a Korean supplier that said, "With your kind permission, the samples will be delivered six weeks late." Of course, it wasn't expected, and the supplier really didn't want anyone's "kind permission." With some understanding of national cultural differences, we can communicate more effectively than this.

Unfortunately, senior managers often put together dispersed teams without appreciating the complications of geographical separation inject. Their actions are driven more by presumed cost savings and resource limitations, or as a result of mergers and acquisitions. Unfortunately, senior managers let team leaders and members sort out these challenges. ■

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