Central to any team’s actions is communication. People respond both to the content of a message and how a message is communicated. Communication climate, psychological safety, social processes, and trust influence the flow of a team’s communications, which impacts both the team’s productivity and cohesiveness. Additionally, the emotional intelligence of the team and individuals in the team help make the team’s communications more sensitive and effective. Improving communication requires building trust within the team, facilitating team meetings, and developing good communication skills.

**Learning Objectives**

1. Why is communication important in teams?
2. What contributes to miscommunication in a team?
3. What biases does a team have when processing information to make a decision?
4. How can one avoid dysfunctional group decision making?
5. How are communication and gender interconnected?
6. How can one build trust within a team?
7. What are the characteristics of supportive and defensive communication climates?
6.1 Communication Process

Communication in teams can be viewed as a transaction (Barnlund, 1970). This perspective emphasizes that communication is more than simply the transmission of a message from a sender to a recipient. Rather, the transactional model of communication recognizes that people are both simultaneously senders and recipients of messages—both verbal and nonverbal feedback provided by a recipient continuously influences the message that a sender sends. Consider a team member beginning a meeting with an enthusiastic update about the team’s progress, only to have blank stares from others in the team. Such nonverbal communication might be interpreted as disinterest, leading to a loss of enthusiasm and change in the direction of the discussion. A second component of the transactional model is that all parties involved in communication influence and are influenced by each other. For example, we often change our communication depending on the recipient of our communication—your communication around your coworkers is likely different than your communication when your manager is present.

Taken together, the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages and the mutual influence of team members illustrate how team communication is a dynamic process that is constantly changing. Consider what occurs when a professor suddenly appears to check in on a group discussion during class; the student’s discussion might shift from the previous night’s events to quickly blurting out praise and intrigue about the concepts from the lesson. However, members are not the only dynamic affecting communication in teams—levels of trust, power, status, and motivation also change over time and have consequences for the cohesiveness and productivity of a team. These dynamics emphasize that not only what you communicate, but how
you communicate is influenced by and influences the functioning of a team. It is important, then, to be aware of how your communication positively or negatively impacts the team, while also attending and adapting to how others are influencing the team.

Verbal Communication

When communicating verbally, we use language in an attempt to share meaning with others. This might include determining the purpose of your team project, sharing information, or deciding on a solution. While this may appear rather straightforward, the nature of language often makes sharing meaning difficult. This is because the meanings of words are often highly subjective. Language is based on words (like dog), which are themselves symbols that refer to something else (a four-legged carnivorous mammal that is often a pet). While the reference of some words is concrete, many others—particularly those involved in problem solving and innovation—are ambiguous. Overlooking this communication element can lead to frustration, failed projects, and wasted time. Consider a team wanting to expand healthy food options on a university campus. There are various contested understandings of what healthy food means—such as low calorie, not processed, locally-sourced, organic, non-GMO, vegan, raw, meat-free, and so forth. It is likely that each member of a team will have a different understanding of what is and what is not healthy food. The team must collectively define precisely what they mean in order to effectively research and implement their goal of expanding healthy food options on campus.

However, team members often assume that everyone understands the same meaning for a word. This is called bypassing, and it can be a source of much misunderstanding and conflict when engaging in activities, such as assigning tasks and processing information. Consider the coordination of a team assignment. The leader may instruct the team to email their section of the report by Thursday so that she or he can put them together for class on Friday. While the leader may have been expecting the sections by noon, some team members may wait until 11:59 p.m. This delay could prevent the leader from effectively combining the sections and lead to decreased team productivity, as well as conflict between members. Similarly, senders of information often have poor perspective-taking and overestimate a receivers’ familiarity with the information being discussed (Keysar & Henly, 2002). This lack of perspective-taking is one reason why technical professionals, such as engineers, have difficulty sharing specialized knowledge in a team—they assume that the receivers have sufficient background information to
make sense of brief messages. To avoid verbal miscommunications, team members need to disambiguate their words with clear definitions.

**Nonverbal Communication**

In addition to using verbal language to share meaning with others, nonverbal cues, such as body language, vocal tones, gestures, touch, eye contact, facial expressions, and use of time and space, can also communicate meaning to others. Moreover, nonverbal messages can replace, emphasize, or even contradict our verbal communication. For example, members can assert dominance over the team through their posture and vocal tones or express contempt through arriving late to a meeting and sarcastically apologizing. Just like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is also ambiguous and easily misunderstood (e.g., is a member not participating because they are tired, disinterested in the project, or angry at another member?). Additionally, nonverbal communication is also continuous—we are always communicating something nonverbally, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Effective team members need to develop awareness as to how their nonverbal communication might be influencing the team and also develop sensitivity to the nonverbal messages of others in the team. As will be discussed later, sensitivity to the nonverbal messages of others and attentiveness to your own nonverbal messages is an essential component of team emotional intelligence.

**Communication Within Teams**

The simultaneous sending and receiving of verbal and nonverbal communication and the mutual influence of all members have widespread implications for the development and functioning of a team. Poor communication can lead to dysfunctional processing of information and unnecessary conflict among team members. However, by developing the knowledge and skills of effective and appropriate communication (Spitzberg, 1983), teams can foster trust, establish appropriate team norms, and develop a collaborative and creative climate. More importantly, it is through continued effective and appropriate communication that these benefits are realized. Trust, for example, is not something that is simply attained and lasts forever. Rather, it is continuously affirmed and reaffirmed through the ongoing interactions between team members: Communication is a transactional process through which we are constantly defining and redefining our relationships with group members. Attention to the flow of communication in a team can empower you to make informed communicative choices that maximize productivity and foster cohesiveness among members.
6.2 Flow of a Team’s Communications

Communication plays a vital role in the functioning of a team. Members need to be aware of how to communicate in a manner that is both effective and appropriate for reaching team goals and maintaining the relationships. Ineffective communication can contribute to dysfunctional processing of information, leading to poor decisions. Misunderstandings can also emerge from differences in gender communication styles. Similarly, inappropriate communication can damage the cohesiveness between team members and impede the development of trust. Choices in how you communicate can establish and maintain a safe communication climate that encourages team members to express their knowledge, opinions, and feelings in difficult situations. Interpersonal processes influence the willingness of team members to share information in team discussions. Trust provides the foundation for open and honest communications in the team.

Dysfunctional Information Processing Within the Team

The use of teams creates the potential to make better decisions because members can pool information from diverse backgrounds and experiences. This benefit of using teams occurs only if members share their unique information with the team. However, teams can engage in dysfunctional information sharing and processing that can lead to poor decision making. For example, teams spend most of their time discussing the information already shared by all members rather than combining the unique knowledge and perspectives of members (Gigone & Hastie, 1997). This focus on common rather than unique information also explains why teams often overlook technical information. This type of information is likely to be known to only a few team members, so the team rarely discusses it. Consequently, the information held by most team members before a discussion has more influence on a decision than information received during a meeting, regardless of whether this information is accurate.

Biases in the ways a team processes information may prevent the team from making good decisions because important information that one member holds is ignored by the team (Stasser, 1992). For example, confirmation bias is the prevalent tendency for people to seek information that confirms their beliefs and attitudes, while ignoring information that contradicts their currently held beliefs and attitudes (Nickerson, 1998). In other words, team members often find what they expect to see when processing information. One study found that the auditory perception of a patient’s breathing (a critical symptom that distinguishes between two life-threatening conditions)
by teams of physicians was influenced by the diagnoses they had anticipated (Tschan et al., 2009)—these physicians heard a breathing pattern that was consistent with the presumed diagnoses even though this breathing pattern was not objectively present. The patient was misdiagnosed because the physicians ignored information that disconfirmed their beliefs. Likewise, design teams may not seek out information that disconfirms the assumptions and beliefs of the team. However, teams that actively process disconfirming information can produce more creative designs, or at the very least, avoid implementing poor solutions. To combat confirmation bias, members should actively find and passionately present disconfirming evidence and information to the team. It can be helpful to assign a member the role of “devil’s advocate” to help establish a norm of challenging the team’s assumptions.

Information can also be processed poorly by a team if they discuss topics in terms of false dichotomies. A false dichotomy is the tendency to view options as two opposing extreme possibilities (e.g., either/or, for/against, etc.) when other possibilities exist (Rothwell, 2015). In other words, perceiving the world in absolute terms (e.g., you are either with me or against me) is often false, since much of reality (and creative solutions) exists in the grey area between these extremes. However, despite this sounding rather obvious, it is often difficult to quickly and easily communicate about these grey areas because our language lacks appropriate words. While we can immediately think and speak in terms of opposites (e.g., short-tall, loud-quiet, etc.), the words to describe the midpoint between these concepts are often vague and nonspecific to the word pairing (between short and tall is average, between loud and quiet is also average, etc.). This illustrates how our language often predisposes us to think in extremes.

False dichotomies can influence the nature of solutions that teams design. Consider the example of a group of students who wished to address the skateboarding ban on campus by advocating for the ban to be repealed—a clear ‘allow-ban’ dichotomy in devising a solution. Given the university administration’s concern for the safety of both pedestrians and skateboarders, the entire proposal was rejected and the group was unsuccessful in achieving their goal. However, a more fruitful solution might have been to advocate for a middle ground position between banning and allowing, such as for permissible times and locations for skateboarding to be allowed on campus (which incidentally is how bicycling on campus is often regulated). Such an integrative solution allows for the needs of both parties to be met. To battle the false dichotomies that emerge in group discussions, it is useful to question absolute statements made by members and to use the language of provisionalism (e.g., sometimes, often, etc.) when discussing information. This provides the communicative space in a discussion to explore alternate solutions.
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Gender and Communication

Research examined group interactions in mixed-sex teams and revealed that men and women tend to exhibit a preference for different communication styles (Tannen, 1991). Masculine communication styles emphasize gaining status, which means that talk embodies independence, competition, exerting control, and reporting knowledge in an effort to elevate their position in the group. Consequently, men tend to speak more, focus on task-oriented information, interrupt, offer advice, and make jokes more often than women in mixed-sex groups. In contrast, feminine communication styles emphasize building connection, which means that talk embodies interdependence, cooperation, and empowerment in an effort to facilitate agreement, interest in others, and participation. Women, then, tend to share feelings, invite others to speak, and listen in order to foster bonds between members. While labeled masculine and feminine, both of these communication styles are used by both sexes—rather there is a tendency for the communication of women to embody connection and the communication of men to embody status.

By understanding these styles of communication, members can better adapt their communication to the group and minimize misunderstandings. For example, the masculine tendency to focus on task-oriented communication may lead a member to consider the sharing of feelings to be a waste of meeting time and discourage a feminine speaker from sharing her emotions with other members. In this scenario, the feminine speaker’s desire to foster connection among members is being marginalized, contributing to a less fulfilling and supportive environment. Likewise, a feminine speaker may share their emotions about a difficult day with the desire of gaining comfort and sympathy from teammates; however, a masculine member may instead offer suggestions on how to fix the cause of their problems. Here, these two communication styles are misaligned and a member is not meeting the communication needs of another member. Such misunderstandings may decrease the trust and cohesiveness of team members. Rather than privileging either feminine or masculine communication styles as superior, team members should seek to respect the need for both to coexist. Indeed, instrumental and relational aspects of teams need to be appropriately managed and understood.

Building Trust

Trust can develop differently across different cultures. For instance, a basis for trust in the United States is through having a shared category membership with group members (e.g., both went to the same college), while in Japan, trust is impacted by sharing interpersonal ties with group members.
Trust is also key to fostering communication in a team. For team members to trust, they must believe the team is competent to complete its task (team efficacy) and the team environment is safe for all members (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005). Trust is the expression of confidence in the team relationship—that is, the confidence one has that other team members will honor their commitments (Thompson, 2004). It is built on past experiences, understanding the motives of others, and a willingness to believe in others. Trust within a team encourages communication and cooperation and makes conflicts easier to resolve.

Trust is based on social relationships (Uzzi, 1997). People make investments in developing and maintaining their relationships; ties among people encourage cooperation and trust. At the beginning of a social encounter, people take a chance on trusting the other person, while observing how the other responds. The experience of future trust is determined by what happens in the relationship. Trust is built and maintained over time through social interactions—through the sharing of feelings and thoughts.

Trust has many impacts on interpersonal communication, cooperation, and teamwork (Jones & George, 1998). When teams have high levels of trust, people are more willing to help others in a variety of situations. The free exchange of information is encouraged, and there is increased participation in the team’s activities. People are more willing to commit to team goals (and to ignore personal goals) when the level of trust is high, plus people are more willing to become involved in the team’s activities.

Trust is an individual behavior, but can be viewed at the team level (DeJong & Dirks, 2012). Although one can talk about the overall level of trust, there is a substantial amount of variability in how much team members trust each other. The lack of trust by only a few members of the team can break down the positive relationship between trust and team performance. Team leaders need to build trust among team members and be aware of specific relationships within the team where trust is low. When there are problems with a lack of trust between particular members, procedures for them to monitor each other’s performance and ensure obligations are met can help the team rebuild trust in specific relationships.

Building trust in a team involves two types of behaviors: trusting and trustworthiness (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). Trusting means being willing to be open with information and sharing with others by providing help and resources. Trustworthiness means accepting the contributions of other team members, supporting their actions, and cooperating in assisting them.

Although building trust is a slow process, trust is quickly and easily destroyed, often by a single incident. Reestablishing trust after it has been
broken may be difficult. The following are some techniques to help (re)build trust:

- Apologize sincerely for actions that destroyed trust in the team.
- Act trusting and demonstrate your support for others in the team.
- Promote cooperation in the team.
- Review the team’s goals and gain commitment to common actions.
- Establish credibility by making sure that actions match words.

**Psychological Safety**

Trust is closely associated with psychological safety in teams. Psychological safety is the perception that members are free to take interpersonal risks and to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of consequences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). It is a climate of interpersonal trust and mutual respect where team members are able to offer ideas, provide feedback, raise issues, admit mistakes, and ask for help without fear of retribution. This is particularly important to teams where the sharing of diverse information and integration of perspectives is a central activity. Indeed, research consistently shows that psychological safety is associated with higher levels of learning from mistakes (Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012), success in diverse teams (Caruso & Woolley, 2008), creativity (Baer & Frese, 2003), and team performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Virtual teams also benefit from psychological safety, as this mitigates the negative effects of geographical dispersion, electronic dependence, and national culture on innovation and performance (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006).

The value of psychological safety can be seen in the operation of cross-functional teams that are composed of members from a variety of technical backgrounds (Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009). The diversity of viewpoints in these teams is crucial for their success, but this only happens if team members are willing to share their knowledge and learn from each other. These teams encounter communication problems, such as socially induced silence, unproductive communication, and differences in professional language. Members of some cultures may also withhold questions, feedback, or disagreement due to cultural norms dictating politeness or face-saving behaviors.

To overcome the problems created by diversity, teams need to develop an environment of psychological safety to mitigate the interpersonal risks of interacting. Team leaders play an important role in establishing psychological safety by inviting input and feedback, while showing openness to receiving critical information. They can also encourage members to speak up by
facilitating communications and minimizing status differences. Assigning the role of devil’s advocate can help to legitimize disagreement in teams. Leaders also demonstrate that failure is an opportunity for learning rather than threatening punishment for communicating about problems. While psychological safety is generally viewed as a cognitive phenomenon, it is manifested through communication (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). This indicates that all team members can foster psychological safety through promoting a supportive communication climate.

Communication Climates

Closely related to psychological safety is the communication climate of groups. Gibb (1961) identified six patterns of group communication that increase or decrease the degree of defensiveness exhibited by members. How one communicates can influence whether team members focus on the content (what they said) or structure (how they said it) of the message. A defensive climate occurs in response to perceived threats to one’s self-esteem and shifts mental attention away from the message content and team tasks to instead defending oneself and distorting information. In the short term, this decreases team productivity and erodes cohesiveness. In the long term, a defensive climate can lead to burnout and turnover (Becker, Halbesleben, & Dan O’Hair, 2005). By contrast, a supportive climate emphasizes the content of a message and yields increased cooperation and trust, which is essential for the development of psychological safety. Team members establish and maintain a supportive communication climate through choices of how they structure their communication. Gibb offers the following patterns of communication that can contribute to a defensive versus supporting climate.

Evaluation Versus Description

Messages with evaluations contain judgments, accusations, you-statements, contempt, fault finding, and criticism (e.g., You haven’t contributed enough to this presentation), which are often met with efforts to absolve oneself from blame (e.g., But, I came to every meeting! Besides, you never gave me clear directions). By contrast, descriptions that involve framing comments in a manner minimize unease and consider the perceptions and feelings of the sender (e.g., I’m concerned that our presentation won’t go well and have some requests that I’d like you to consider). Strategies to adopt more descriptive language include using “I-statements” rather than “You-statements” and providing genuine praise before negative feedback (Hornsey, Robson, Smith, Esposo, & Sutton, 2008).
Control Versus Problem Orientation

A defensive climate can emerge from communication aimed at controlling other people by telling them what to do. Indeed, research on psychological reactance reveals that efforts to control one’s behavior are often met with resistance or even the opposite behavior (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). This can be illustrated by imagining the typical response of a child being told to clean his or her room. Similarly, members in teams often respond negatively to demands placed on them by others. For example, demanding that a team member skip a planned social event in order to finish an assignment might lead to resistance. However, a more effective pattern of communication is to focus instead on the problem and invite ideas for solving the problem (e.g., What can we do in order to finish this project by tonight?). This allows for a productive conversation aimed at how to solve the problem, rather on placing demands on specific team members.

Strategy Versus Spontaneity

People are sensitive to strategies employed to manipulate or deceive them, such as members excusing themselves from a meeting by calling in “sick” or leaving a meeting early because they suddenly have an “appointment.” While certainly there are times when such reasons may reflect reality, they contribute to a defensive climate when perceived to be strategic ways of evading uncomfortable questions, withholding information, or not participating. Instead, employing spontaneous communication that is honest, assertive, and contains true self-disclosure can promote an atmosphere of trust in a team (e.g., I did not sleep well last night and can’t meaningfully contribute to this meeting. Can I make it up somehow?).

Neutrality Versus Empathy

When people communicate, they want to feel heard and to have their perspective considered. In team discussions, however, members may respond with indifference or make little effort to acknowledge others. An example of neutrality is responding to a member’s concern about the ethics of a group decision with a dismissive, “No, it’s fine. Don’t worry. Let’s move on.” Other times a member’s email or text message to the team might be completely ignored—even professors can feel devalued by students that fall asleep in class or are distracted by technology. Such behaviors are frustrating and disrespectful, which can contribute to a defensive climate. A supportive climate can be fostered by communicating with empathy—taking another’s perspectives and feelings into account. This can be achieved through positive nonverbal behaviors (e.g., listening, putting away a phone during conversations)
or verbal behaviors (e.g., *Let's devote the next five minutes to discussing your concern about the ethics of our decision*).

**Superiority Versus Equality**

Teams often are composed of members possessing differences in power, intelligence, knowledge, skill, wealth, and so on. Despite these differences, messages that are communicated in a superior, belittling manner (e.g., *You’re taking too long, I’ll just show you the right way to do this*, or *No, I’m the one who has done this before. I know best*) evoke defensiveness that can stifle trust and even promote hostility. This defensiveness can impede the psychological safety of the team by limiting the ability or desire of members to provide meaningful feedback or ask for help that they may need. Instead, adopting communication that embodies a tone of equality (e.g., *I can show you what worked for me, if you’d like*, or *I’d like to hear all of your thoughts on this matter*) and even self-deprecating humor (Greengross & Miller, 2008) encourages harmony and productivity in a team.

**Certainty Versus Provisionalism**

Few things in life are absolutely certain. On standardized exams, answers containing absolute statements (e.g., always, never, impossible, won’t, etc.) are often the incorrect choices and can be a source of frustration for students failing to recall this test-taking strategy. Similarly, team members that communicate with absolute certainty can come across as narrow-minded and unwilling to acknowledge other points of view. Communicating with certainty may shut down discussion (e.g., *That idea will never work!* and decrease motivation (e.g., *We’ll never finish this presentation by tomorrow!* in the team. Instead, qualifying messages through provisional language by using words like possibly, might, and sometimes can contribute to more supportive climates where issues can be openly discussed and explored (e.g., *That idea might work, but I have a few concerns*).

These six patterns of communication offer guidance in fostering a supportive communication climate. A communication climate develops in cycles (Lumsden & Lumsden, 1997). When team members communicate with supportive statements, others tend to reciprocate with supportive statements, which encourages trust and openness, and increases their willingness to communicate again. This cycle further increases trust and maintains a supportive climate. However, defensive communication begets defensive communication from others and can quickly spiral into criticism, conflict, and decreased trust. This underscores the importance of quickly recognizing and breaking dysfunctional cycles of defensive communication when they emerge in teams. Adopting supportive patterns of communication can help to establish and
maintain psychological safety and promote trust in the team. Still, these should not be expected to work in all situations. Moreover, there are times when defensive strategies are needed, such as using control when dismissing an underperforming member from a team.

6.3 Emotional Intelligence

Feelings and emotions pervade the fabric of teams. Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to solve emotional problems (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). EI is an important aspect of communication in team discussions and is associated with enhanced levels of team performance (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009) and reduced team conflict (Yang & Mossholder, 2004). Additionally, emotional intelligence in members is consistently associated with leadership emergence in teams (Côté, Lopes, Salovey, & Miners, 2010). It includes the following four components:

1. Self-awareness—the ability to identify, understand, and discuss one’s emotions;
2. Empathy—the ability to perceive, recognize, and experience others’ emotions;
3. Emotional regulation—the ability to regulate one’s emotions and control the expression of emotions; and
4. Relationship management—the ability to respond to others’ emotions with respect and concern for the relationship. (See Figure 6.1.)

Although EI can be viewed as a skill of individual team members, EI can also be viewed as a part of the team’s communication climate. Team EI is about building norms that support the awareness and regulation of emotions.

Figure 6.1 Components of Team Emotional Intelligence

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<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Emotional regulation</td>
<td>Relationship management</td>
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within the team (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Our relationships with team members are not the product of any single interaction, but rather are constantly being defined and redefined during ongoing communication exchanges (Parks, 1977). The ability to recognize and regulate one’s emotions and the emotions of others during these ongoing interactions can enhance the relationships of team members. Regulating ones’ expression of emotion is important because emotions are contagious in small groups (Ilies, Wagner, & Morgeson, 2007), often occurring without members even being aware of it (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). In particular, team leaders have the most influence over team emotions (Visser, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & Wisse, 2013).

The development of emotional awareness of a team is influenced greatly by norms. Indeed, collectively endorsed team norms (Diefendorff, Erickson, Grandey, & Dahling, 2011) can shape the emotions felt and displayed in teams (Barsade & O’Neill, 2014). Consequently, team norms can develop that suppress emotions (Menges & Kilduff, 2015), require expression of specific emotions (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989), or encourage open expression of a range of emotions (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998). One way to foster team EI is through developing emotional awareness norms, such as taking time to get to know each other in order to increase interpersonal understanding and to ensure equal participation so that all perspectives can be considered. Emotional regulation norms include setting ground rules for conversational courtesy, providing emotional support to help team members, creating outlets to express emotions, and developing a positive communication environment. These behavioral norms help build trust among team members, create a strong team identity, and develop a sense of team efficacy.

Emotionally intelligent teams are aware of the emotional reactions of team members and develop norms that encourage both confrontation and caring. For example, when a team is trying to make a decision and one member disagrees, it is easy for the team to vote and move on to the next issue. However, an emotionally intelligent team would pause and try to better understand why a team member objects to the decision. They would engage in perspective taking to help understand the issue from alternative views. This shows that the team appreciates and has respect for this perspective, and it may lead to a consensus decision that is acceptable to all team members.

Team EI has many positive impacts on team processes and performance. Emotionally intelligent teams are better able to work through emotional problems, which motivates team members and increases group cohesion.
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(Ayoko, Callan, & Härtel, 2008). They have higher levels of team trust, which is important for developing a collaborative environment and promoting creativity (Barczak, Lassk, & Mulki, 2010). EI teams are more effective when working in demanding and stressful situations because they have better coordination, fewer conflicts, and use more collaborative conflict resolution approaches (Farh, Seo, & Tesluk, 2012).

One of the most significant results of team EI is the way conflicts are managed. In interdisciplinary teams like medical teams, teams with low levels of EI have poorer social skills, more disruptive behaviors, and use more coercive power tactics (McCallin & Bamford, 2007). Conflicts in these teams threaten the psychological safety of members. Teams with higher levels of EI have fewer conflicts and the conflicts are less intense (Ayoko et al., 2008). These teams are more likely to use a collaborative approach to resolve conflict, while teams with lower levels of EI are more likely to use avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy (Jordan & Troth, 2004).

Teams can improve their EI in several ways. Emotionally intelligent team leaders can model appropriate behavior and facilitate sensitive team communications (Koman & Wolff, 2008). Teams can develop behavioral norms to guide how they manage emotions. Team settings are a good way to teach people how to act with emotional intelligence (Ferris, 2009). Experiential group activities can be used to learn how to perceive emotions, manage one’s emotional responses, and act effectively in emotionally challenging social situations. Team-based learning approaches also help build social bonds within the team by creating a psychologically safe context for applying the newly learned emotional abilities (Clarke, 2010).

To discover your own level of EI and discuss how emotionally intelligent norms impact team communication, take the team EI survey at the end of this chapter.

6.4 Facilitating Team Meetings

“So, what are we doing?” These are perhaps the five most frightening words to hear at the beginning of a team meeting. It indicates that the next sixty minutes will probably be spent figuring out why you are meeting for sixty minutes. No wonder that team meetings are often viewed negatively as a waste of time (Rogelberg, Shanock, & Scott, 2012)—many of the meetings you have attended in the past likely were a waste of time if they were poorly structured, started late, lacked purpose, went off topic, were dominated by a few individuals, and/or ended late (Rogelberg, Allen, Shanock, Scott, &
Shuffler, 2010). Luckily, bad meetings are not inevitable. By introducing a structure that helps control and facilitate communication, meetings can make more efficient use of everyone’s time.

Meetings are where teams share information, make decisions, solve problems, and make sense of their purpose. While a well-structured meeting can actually save time and improve effectiveness of a team, many teams choose not to invest the time in preparing an effective agenda nor managing the participation of members. Instead, poorly structured meetings are often dominated by a few members—in a typical four-person group, two people do more than 70% of the talking; in a six-person group, three people do more than 85% of the talking (Shaw, 1981). Equal participation is an important predictor of success in a variety of team tasks (Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010), while unequal participation contributes to dissatisfaction and frustration. Moreover, effective meetings can actually improve attitudes toward meetings and the team as a whole.

In general, meetings start with a review of the agenda and warm-up activities designed to get people talking socially. The body of the meeting focuses on managing the communication process and making the team’s decisions. The meeting ends with a summary of decisions and assignments and an evaluation of how well the team is operating. (See Figure 6.2.) Research provides additional guidelines for organizing and conducting effective meetings:

1. **Only have a meeting when there is no other alternative.** Consider the tasks that need to be accomplished and determine if a meeting is truly necessary. Use alternatives when appropriate (e.g., voting via email, quick discussion via teleconference, etc.). You may even set standards for when you have a meeting, such as only when there is a compelling agenda or unresolved issues that impact interdependent tasks (Rogelberg, Scott, & Kello, 2007).

2. **Distribute an agenda several days before the meeting.** Meetings function more effectively when they are planned in advance (Rogelberg et al., 2007) and meeting participants enjoy meetings more when they have a clear objective (Allen et al., 2012). Several days before the meeting, send members an agenda that includes the location, time, duration, and purpose of the meeting. Most importantly, include a concise list of discussion topics, time estimates for topics, and reading materials so that members can come prepared. Some meeting coordinators may solicit additional topics from members to be included in the agenda.

3. **Keep the meeting on time.** People often dislike meetings because they go off topic and run late. Assign a team member to be a timekeeper whose job is to keep the meeting on schedule and end on time. Determine a time limit for individual members to speak so that everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion.
4. Manage disruptive behaviors. Disruptive team members may dominate the discussion, be overly talkative, or be rude to other team members. All team members share responsibility for handling difficult members; it is not just the job of the leader to maintain the flow of the meeting. The leader should acknowledge and verbally reward acceptable behaviors. If problem behaviors persist, the leader should talk privately with repeat offenders. If none of these approaches work, assistance from outside the team (e.g., a manager responsible for supervising the offender) may be required.

5. Summarize important discussions and decisions. The leader must keep team members focused on the agenda topics. To keep the group process flowing, the leader should stop after discussion of each major agenda item and summarize the team’s conclusions. This allows for a check on whether all team members agree with what has happened at the meeting.

6. Evaluate the group process at the end of each meeting. The team should evaluate the effectiveness of meetings to identify how the meeting operated, whether there are areas for improvement, and if the meeting objectives were achieved. It is important to gather perceptions from all meeting attendees about the meeting quality because leaders tend to have more positive perceptions of the meeting than those who are not in a position of power (Cohen, Rogelberg, Allen, & Luong, 2011). These group process evaluations provide feedback to the team about its performance and help deal with problems before they get emotionally out of hand. (See the Appendix for a discussion of the use of group process evaluations.)

Figure 6.2 Facilitating a Team Meeting

START-UP
- Review Agenda: purpose and desired outcomes
- Warm-up activity

FACILITATE MEETING
- Maintain open climate
- Manage disruptive behaviors
- Manage differences
- Make decisions

WRAP-UP
- Summarize important decisions
- Check results against desired outcomes
- Group process evaluation

7. Distribute minutes of the meeting. Lack of follow-through on what is discussed is another predictor of dissatisfaction with team meetings (Rogelberg et al., 2010). Indeed, it can be frustrating when a member assigned with completing a task comes to the meeting and announces that they forgot they were supposed to do that. This can be alleviated by assigning someone to create a summary of what was discussed, what decisions were made, what needs to be deliberated, and what actions are expected of members before the next meeting. This not only keeps team members accountable for their assigned tasks, but also updates members who may have been absent from the meeting.

6.5 Communication Skills for Team Meetings

There are many communication skills that are useful for team members. This section reviews four skills.

1. Ask questions. Many types of questions are useful for promoting team discussions (Hackett & Martin, 1993). In general, open-ended questions encourage discussion, whereas close-ended questions (e.g., yes/no questions) tend to limit discussion. It is better to ask the team to discuss the pros and cons of an idea than to ask team members whether they agree or disagree with it. After someone has answered a question, it is often useful to ask follow-up questions to clarify the issues. When questions are addressed to the leader, they should be redirected back to the team, if possible, to promote discussion.

   When an individual member of the team is asked a direct question by the leader, it can be a threatening experience that reduces discussion. Leaders should try to ask questions of the entire team whenever possible. After asking a question, the leader should remember to give team members sufficient time to respond. The leader should reward participation by acknowledging responses. If no one responds, the leader should try rewording the question or going around the room and having everyone comment on it. A lack of response may mean that the question has a bias or is putting some team members on the defensive.

2. Listen actively. The goal of active listening is to provide feedback to the sender of a communication to clarify the communication and promote discussion (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). Good listeners communicate their desire to understand the message and improve their understanding rather than being a conversation narcissist. When listening to a team member, you can respond with either a support response or a shift response (Vangelisti, Knapp, & Daly, 1990). A shift response can erode a supportive climate through refocusing attention from the speaker to oneself by changing the topic of discussion, therefore disregarding the concerns of the speaker. By contrast, a support response demonstrates your awareness by keeping the team’s attention on the speaker and their topic. For example, the leader of your team mentions that they are frustrated with the meetings...
frequently starting late. A shift response is, “Well, I am frustrated that we never have food here. We should do something about that.” A support response is, “That is frustrating. What do you think we should do about it?”

Active listening is another approach to improving communication. In this approach, the listener paraphrases what he or she heard and asks the sender if this is correct. The paraphrasing should convey the listener’s understanding of the communication rather than a simple parroting of the message. This sends a message that the listener cares about understanding the message and allows the sender to clarify the communication if needed. Although this is a useful technique, it can become tiresome if used all the time.

3. Give constructive feedback. Everyone needs feedback to improve performance. However, receiving feedback (especially negative feedback) may be an uncomfortable experience. Improving one’s ability to give constructive feedback is an important teamwork skill (Scholtes, 1994).

The first step in learning to give constructive feedback is recognizing the need for it. Both positive and negative feedback are important. Before giving feedback, examine the context in order to better understand why the behaviors occurred. If a situation is emotional, it is best to wait until things calm down before giving constructive feedback. A team member or leader giving feedback should describe the situation accurately, try not to be judgmental, and speak for himself or herself. When receiving feedback, one should listen carefully, ask questions to better understand, acknowledge reception of the feedback, and take time to sort it out.

If a member is giving solely negative feedback, he or she is not being constructive. Expressing solely negative feedback on the performance or ideas of other team members makes the receivers defensive and discourages communication. It is better to reward desired ideas and behaviors rather than punish the undesirable ideas and behaviors. When giving negative feedback to a team member, corrective alternatives should be offered. Also, negative feedback should be given privately to avoid embarrassing the recipient.

There are several techniques that can improve a team’s ability to accept feedback about its performance:

- **Focus on the future.** Focusing on the past makes people defensive. Focus the information on how to improve future performance.
- **Focus on specific behaviors.** Providing general information does not help the team identify the changes needed in its behavior.
- **Focus on learning and problem solving.** The information provided should help the team improve, not just focus on its deficiencies.

4. Manage feelings. When emotions become disruptive to the operation of the team, they must be managed effectively (Kayser, 1990). People cannot be prevented from becoming emotional. When emotional issues are related to the team’s task, the issues should be addressed in the team meeting. Emotional conflicts related to personal issues may need to be handled in private. All team members should learn how
to handle emotional interactions in the team. The following is an approach to managing feelings during team meetings.

- **Stay neutral.** People have a right to their feelings. The team should encourage and acknowledge the expression of feelings.
- **Understand feelings rather than evaluate them.** All team members should be sensitive to verbal and nonverbal messages. When dealing with emotional issues, it is best to ask questions and seek information to better understand the feelings.
- **Process feelings in the group.** When the team’s operation is disrupted by emotions, the team should stop and be silent briefly to cool down. Once that has happened, the task-related issues should be discussed as a group.

This approach to managing emotions is useful when the emotional issues are related to tasks. Team norms that encourage open communication of emotions increase the performance benefits of task-related conflict (Jehn, 1995). However, norms that encourage open communication about relationship-oriented conflict have a negative impact on teams. When emotions are about personal or relationship issues, it is not a benefit to process them with the team.

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**LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS: RUNNING VIRTUAL MEETINGS TO ENSURE EVERYONE IS FOLLOWING THE AGENDA AND PEOPLE ARRIVE AT THE SAME UNDERSTANDING**

**Problem:** It is more difficult for the leader of a virtual meeting to set and manage an agenda of activities. It is more difficult for participants of a virtual meeting to follow and keep focused on the agenda and activities of a virtual meeting.

**Solution:** Several solutions can be employed by a virtual meeting leader to address these issues.

1. Publish the agenda ahead of time. Prior access to the agenda permits meeting participants to adequately prepare materials and resources for effective participation. With virtual meetings, it is more likely the meeting leader may not be aware of potential available resources and information or scheduling conflicts that could impact meeting effectiveness. Prior access to the agenda may mitigate these issues.
2. Break the meeting into short chunks. While any well-organized meeting is broken into agenda items, focus and activity at a virtual meeting is improved by breaking the meeting into shorter agenda segments. This is because distributed participants will have trouble maintaining focus during long segments; will cognitively check out during segments of little interest to them (and then have trouble reengaging); and will have fewer cognitive cues to integrate large chunks of complex material generated during long segments. Shorter segments mitigate these issues and provide more opportunity to reengage participants.

3. Script the virtual meeting more tightly than a face-to-face meeting. The advantages of tight scripting are that without nonverbal cues, verbal instructions must be unambiguous and clear; tangential discussions, which contribute to distributed participants losing focus on the agenda, are less likely to occur; and distributed participants who have lost focus are more likely to be able to refocus their attention by linking the activity to the agenda.

4. Create a common visual focus during meetings. The existence of a shared visual focus reinforces a shared understanding among meeting participants. In a face-to-face meeting, shared focus may be on the face of the speaker, on a public display, or on an object of shared exploration (e.g., a photo, a model, a device). In a virtual meeting, the leader must be careful in selecting communication and collaboration tools to ensure that shared focus is present.

5. Create a team display of the meeting process. The common metaphors for this are “dashboard” or “scoreboard.” This information might include any of the following information:

- list of meeting participants, perhaps with access to profiles about each;
- access to team databases or support information;
- view of meeting agenda with indication of the current place on the agenda; and
- relevant statistics describing meeting or project progress.

6. Provide separate communication channels for task and process issues. In a face-to-face meeting, participants who have questions about the meeting process or need personal support can find a moment to engage the leader in a side conversation. In a virtual meeting, a leader must provide a channel for process questions and technical support. If no secondary channel is provided, participants will use the primary channel, interrupting the meeting in order to acquire process support. By choosing tools so that two channels are available, each clearly indicated
for specific purposes, process support can occur with minimal disrup-
tion to the meeting activities. For example, most web conferencing
products (e.g., WebEx, GoToMeeting) not only provide a primary chan-
nel for audio conversation and visual data presentation, but also contain
a text chat channel that can be employed for process support by the
leader or facilitator.

Summary

Communication is one of the central activities of a team—it is an ongoing
process in which members are continuously influencing and are influenced
by other team members. By understanding how your verbal and nonverbal
communication impacts the team, you can employ communication choices
that are more effective and appropriate for the functioning of the team. The
meaning of words and nonverbal gestures are often ambiguous and subjec-
tive, particularly in teams with diverse members. This requires that members
clarify definitions and confirm interpretations to avoid misunderstandings.
The team’s ability to effectively process information depends on members
who actively question their assumptions, seek disconfirming information,
and do not speak in false dichotomies. Mutual respect for masculine and
feminine communication styles provides insights as to the needs of team
members and fosters a more fulfilling environment. Trust is needed for mem-
bers to fully participate in teams, which necessitates developing psychological
safety and supportive communication climates. This strongly impacts the
willingness of members to pool knowledge in order to make better decisions.

Recognizing and managing emotions is an important aspect of a team’s
communications. Emotional intelligence is both an individual skill and a set of
team norms that encourage effective ways to handle emotions in teams. Emo-
tionally intelligent teams have more supportive communications and higher
levels of trust, and team members handle conflict in a collaborative fashion.

Team meetings operate more effectively if a facilitator structures the com-
munication before, during, and after the meeting. Providing an agenda in
advance allows both that members are adequately prepared and that they
are held accountable for coming to the meeting prepared. During meetings,
the facilitator should maintain an open and collaborative climate, manage
disruptive behaviors, manage differences, summarize important decisions,
and evaluate the group process. After meetings, provide the team with min-
utes summarizing the decisions and remind members of actions expected
before the next meeting.
A number of important communication skills are useful for team members to learn and perform. Asking open-ended, nonthreatening questions fosters better team interactions. Active listening helps clarify the communicator’s meaning and acknowledges the importance of the message. Giving constructive feedback is a technique that helps team members learn to improve their performance. Teams can be disrupted by emotions; learning how to process emotions in a group is an important skill.

Team Leader’s Challenge 6

You are the leader of a customer service improvement team that meets weekly at the end of the workday. Early in the team’s life, the team had some communication skills training. You closely follow the analysis and decision-making structures from the company’s Customer Service Improvement Manual. Over time, as the team has become more comfortable with analyzing quality problems and creating solutions, you have been using less structure in facilitating the team meetings.

However, you begin to notice problems with the meetings. Not everyone is participating, and the discussions are becoming dominated by several of the older male team members. You notice that their critical personal remarks have silenced some of the women team members. An argument that took place several meetings ago has caused other team members to stop participating during the meetings. Also, discussions tend to drift off topic and seem like repeats of previous conversations.

What should the team leader do to get the team’s communications back on track?

What is the best way to handle problem team members during the meetings?

Does the team need more skills training, more communication structure, or outside facilitation? Justify your answer.

Survey: Team Emotional Intelligence

Purpose: To make you aware of your level of emotional intelligence. The survey shows how an emotional intelligence perspective affects communication in a team. You may know what the most emotionally intelligent response is to a situation, yet recognize that you do not always act in this manner.
Directions: Imagine you are a team member facing the following difficult situations. Select the response that best indicates what you think someone should do and what you would most likely do in that situation.

1. You are a relatively new member to the project team. The team leader has given you an important assignment. This is your chance to show the team leader your value to the team, but only if you are successful. If you fail at this task, it could damage your career.
   a. Thinking about the assignment makes you feel anxious, so you put off working on it for awhile.
   b. Try to relax, think about some alternative approaches to the assignment, and then talk with some other team members about which alternative is best to try.
   c. Work on the assignment for several weeks before telling the other team members about it.
   d. Explain to the other team members how worried you are and ask them to support your ideas.

   People should do: ________ I would do: ________

2. You are a member of a manufacturing team and a friend of yours on the team has borrowed one of your tools. Although you asked him to return the tool to you, he has not done it so far.
   a. Ignore it. Maintaining a friendship is more important than getting the tool back.
   b. Act coolly toward him until he returns the tool.
   c. Explain to your friend that you need the tool and ask him politely to return it.
   d. Friends don’t act this way, so you should think about ending the friendship.

   People should do: ________ I would do: ________

3. During the last few team meetings, you notice that one of the team members seems nervous when talking with you.
   a. Decide that the team member isn’t interested in working with you, so you focus your communications toward other team members.
   b. Try to interact with the team member in more informal situations so that you can get to know him better.
c. Communicate more formally with this team member since he is not being friendly.

d. Be very careful around the team member because you suspect that you have done something to offend him.

**People should do:** ________  **I would do:** ________

4. A team member who works near you has the annoying habit of singing to himself while working on a computer. This is really starting to bother you.

a. Tell the team leader that it is his responsibility to fix the situation by getting the person to stop or moving him to another work area.

b. Make jokes about this habit to the team member and hope that he gets the hint.

c. Explain to the team member that this habit annoys you and ask that he stop doing it.

d. Ignore the problem because you don’t want to disrupt team relations.

**People should do:** ________  **I would do:** ________

5. While making lunch in the break room, you accidentally knock over a cup of coffee that falls on the floor.

a. Get angry at yourself because you are a clumsy person.

b. Clean up the mess and laugh about how accidents always seem to happen to you.

c. Become embarrassed and leave the break room before anyone sees you.

d. Glare at the other people in the break room so they won’t say anything.

**People should do:** ________  **I would do:** ________

6. You have been working on an important part of the team project for the last several months. When you present your work at a team meeting, the team leader criticizes your work.

a. Ignore the criticism and convince yourself that the team leader was just having a bad day.

b. Focus on trying to improve your work based on the criticisms you received.
c. Feel so emotionally upset that you go home for the day.
d. Think about how unfair the criticisms are and how the team does not appreciate your hard work.

**People should do: _____ I would do: _____**

7. There is a heated disagreement at the team meeting about how to handle a problem. Another team member forcefully attacks your position.

a. Hold firm to your position and make new arguments to support it.
b. Get angry with the critical team member and attack his position.
c. Try to develop alternative solutions to the problem in a calm fashion.
d. Shift the discussion at the meeting to a new topic.

**People should do: _____ I would do: _____**

8. At a social gathering of the team, a male team member criticizes a female team member who is not present. You like and respect the female team member.

a. To get along with the group, agree and add a few other negative comments about the female team member.
b. Don’t say anything during the event, but later in private tell the male team member how you really feel about his comments.
c. Tell the male team member that his criticisms are inappropriate and then shift to another topic of conversation.
d. Don’t say anything, but then later feel bad about not intervening in the conversation.

**People should do: _____ I would do: _____**

**Scoring:**

Scoring is based on demonstrating empathy and showing respect. The most emotionally intelligent responses are the following: 1 = b, 2 = c, 3 = b, 4 = c, 5 = b, 6 = b, 7 = c, 8 = c.
Discussion:

1. How well did you do on the survey? How does your score compare to others?

2. Is there a difference between your “should” and “would” answers? How do you explain the difference? Is this a problem?

3. Focus on question #8. Why is the best answer c instead of b? When and how should you stand up for others?


Activity: Observing Communication Patterns in a Team

Objective: Communication within a team often develops into patterns. Team members can either speak to the entire team or speak to individual team members. Some team members talk a lot, while others remain relatively silent. Observing communication patterns reveals whether the team is working collaboratively, developing subgroups, or being dominated by certain individuals.

Activity: During a team meeting or group discussion of the Team Leader’s Challenge, note when a team member speaks and to whom. The member can either speak to another individual or to the team as a whole. Using Activity Worksheet 6.1, record the team’s communication pattern by drawing arrows connecting the various communicators. Use slash marks on the arrows to note additional communications.

Analysis: Was most of the team’s communication to the team as a whole? Did you notice any patterns of communication? Were certain team members more likely to dominate the team’s discussion? Can you determine who the team leader is by observing this communication pattern? How equal were the team’s communications?

Discussion: What should the team leader do to facilitate more equal participation in team discussions?
ACTIVITY WORKSHEET 6.1
Communication Patterns in a Team

Team Member 1

Communicates to the Entire Team

Team Member 6

Team Member 2

Team Member 3

Team Member 4

Team Member 5