

Improving Inclusivity and Communication in Executive Teams – Concrete Actions

Ideas from:

ONTOS global

Teams generally get “stuck” in 3 areas when attempting to reach their goals:

1. **Identifying** a shared issue/topic
 - What is the real goal? What are the issues?
2. True **connection** with one another for real cohesion or shift
 - Does the group support its members who hold less power? Can we adjust to others' learning styles? Do we know each other well enough to value and trust each other?
3. Adequate **closure** so learning can occur
 - What was accomplished? What was not? What did we learn about how we solve problems? What did we learn about someone else in the room?

Ideas to improve inclusivity and communication:

1. Improving communication processes

Leaders are often tempted to create new vehicles for communication, when making current communication vehicles stronger is generally more advised. Instead

- Identify the communication processes in your organization *that already exist*
- Hold a process improvement conversation with participation from all stakeholders

2. Move to/from “Task” orientation and “Relationship” orientation

Research shows that the most successful virtual teams know when to switch from task to relational and back. Teams need leaders competent in group process skills.

3. Group Process Tips

- Do a check-in at the beginning of the meeting, allowing each person - one at a time - to make any comment. (Consider one at the end, too, if there has been much disagreement or debate, so you can read individuals' perspectives, needs, and what follow-up might be needed. *Check-ins help people transition psychologically by stating what's on their mind. They also promote awareness of others, ability for different ideas to emerge, and acknowledgement of each individual.*
- Ask quiet members what they think. *Full participation means providing an "opening" for some members. Asking an opinion also communicates appreciation about what each member brings to the group.*

- Protect members from attack by defending the minority idea or perspective. *Members need to feel safe in the group setting.*
- Question those decisions that come too quickly. *Dominant voices often steer conversations.*
- Appoint roles, like “devil's advocate”, the “minority view”, “inclusivity advocate” etc, (while avoiding giving the role to those already known for that behavior.) *Decision making processes are sometimes flawed because of "group think" when alternatives are not uncovered. Plus, you foster needed team skills.*
- Set ground rules and use them to point out errant behavior. *Behavioral guidelines give members a vehicle by which to address sensitive issues.*
- Create playful devices for pointing out such behavior. These often emerge from the group spontaneously. Reinforce them. *Members need a way to hold each other to agreements in a non-threatening way.*
- Keep conversations (and communication in general) balanced between “what’s working” and “what’s not”. *In environments of substantial change or work overload, focusing only on problems is de-motivating and creates unduly unsatisfying work places.*

4. With whom you communicate

- Map out your stakeholders (groups and/or individuals) on a paper. (This is sometimes called a “relationship map.”)
- Identify where your most important relationships are and why
- Indicate where relations are strong or weak
- Be aware of where you need to spend more time/energy and where you could spend less
- Note the effective influencers to these people
- Keep in mind that relationships in most contexts should be stronger with one’s “first team” (peers), over one’s “second team” of subordinates. If this is not the case for you, you may want to re-allocate your time.

5. Modes of Communication

Be more “high context” when possible, to build relationships. *Who do you often email who you could periodically call instead? With whom do you have a lot of virtual communication who you could see more often?*

6. Informal Time Together

- Spend more time together, at times with no agenda and at times with some group process to promote what the group needs (certain people to connect, direct them toward a conversation topic, etc.)
- When planning these events, rotate responsibility. Leader injects criteria, as needed.

7. Conflict

- Encourage disagreement by recognizing constructive conflict when you see it (especially those who don't generally engage the group in this way). *Overt leadership approval makes it clear that conflict is ok. The more sensitive the topic, the more acknowledgement of people is required.* (On the flip side, acknowledge the person who generally disagrees -- or regularly provides a non-congruent view -- when s/he *agrees* with others or supports someone else/the group. You are helping them build breadth of communication skills.)
- Put the onus on the group (not the individual) when someone is not being heard. "We need to understand what ("name") is trying to say right now."
- Use a communication or problem-solving model to help you guide these conversations.