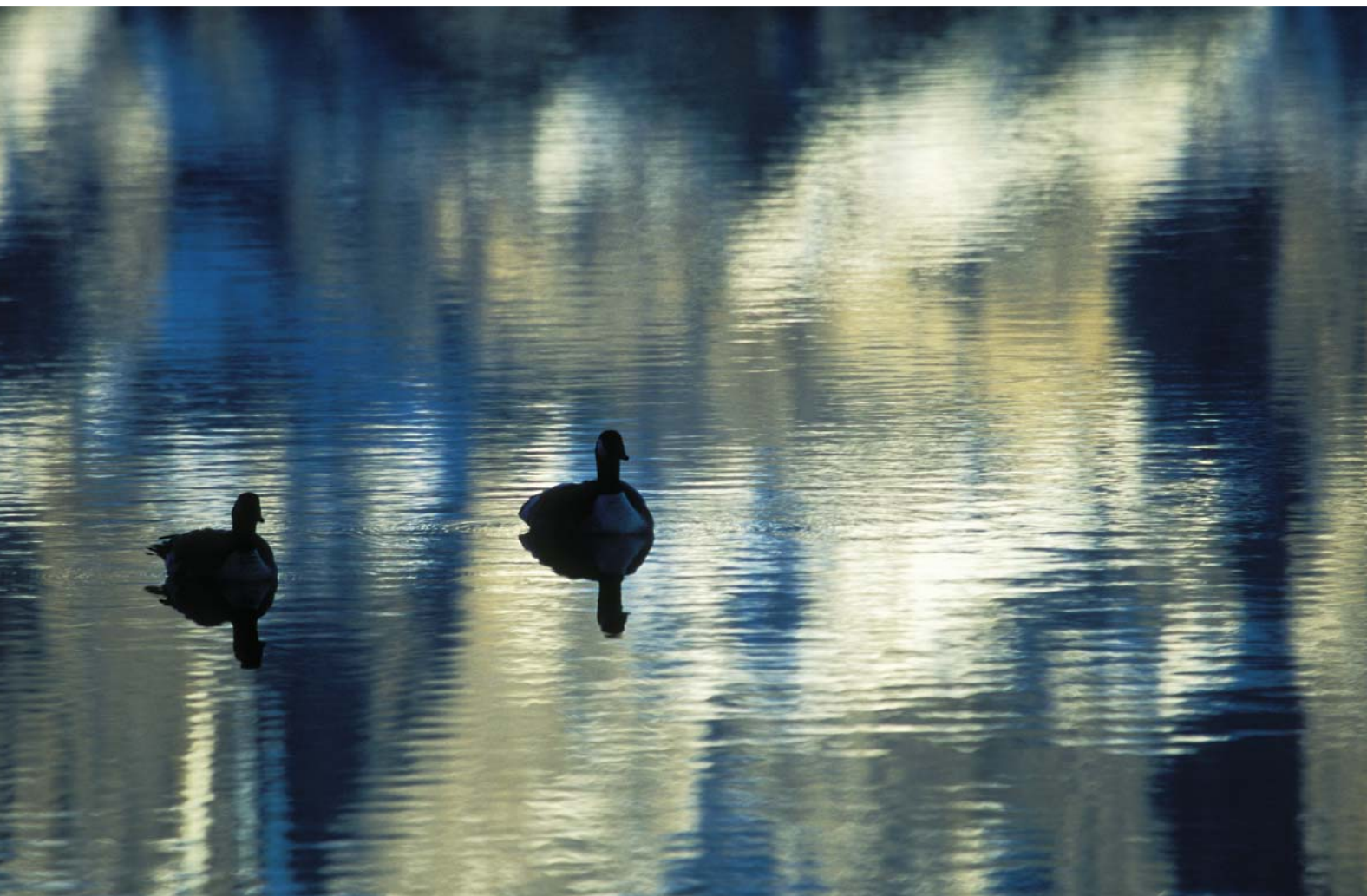


COMMUNICATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE TEAMS

BY DAVID OMAN



Effective teamwork is critical for organizational success, and the key enabler of effective teams is excellent communications. Think back on the teams that you have participated in. What was communication like in the really high performing teams compared to the ones that didn't work well? The quality of communications defines the effectiveness of any group interaction.

Poor communications can disable even the most skilled teams. Trust, productivity, and morale are seriously impacted by poor communications.

We all agree that good communication is essential, so how can we avoid the pitfalls? For over 25 years I have worked with large and small companies in the private, public, and education sectors in industries as varied as oil and gas, healthcare, telecommunications, and municipal governance. My observations are that three key factors emerge as the root of communication problems.

Power Imbalances

We have all heard the expression “the view is different from the top,” and in many ways this is true. Your staff sees you in a different position. Even though you may approach them as equals on a team to solve a business problem, they can never forget that you are the boss, and therefore have power over them. Power imbalances make open and honest conversations very difficult, and it is a courageous employee who can tell the emperor that they have no clothes.

Expediency

We never have enough time to do everything we need to do...so, sometimes we take shortcuts and send an email when a phone call or personal visit would be best. Sometimes we neglect to let everyone on the team know, or assume that a message will be passed on. Failing to communicate consistently to all team members can create distrust, isolation, and resentment.

Lack of Detail

Sometimes it is easy to forget that our style or need for information may not be the style of others. For example, I often prefer to work at a strategic level and view communications from a high level. As such, I may present a “big picture” perspective that may completely frustrate staff with a need for the details of how a new policy or strategy might affect them. Generalized or vague communication can be perceived as filtering.

Three steps to more effective team communications:

Find a Way to Level the Playing Field

King Arthur was a leader who accomplished what many of us strive for in teamwork. There will always be differences in position which can act as barriers in communications, but consider how you could apply the concept of the “Knights of the Round Table” to your team. Arthur was able to overcome the “head of table” barrier by physically changing the shape of the table. I knew a CFO who would go around to all team members on Friday afternoons, sit down in their guest chair, and chat informally about what was new in the organization. This executive removed the barrier by sitting on the other side of the desk and communicating to his team informally.

Take the Time

Communications has two essential components to it, sending and receiving. Just because we send some information does not necessarily mean that it will be received as intended. The best way to check if your message was received properly is to listen...really listen. Of course this becomes more difficult over the phone or by email, so whenever possible, important messages should be delivered face to face so that you can carefully observe the reaction to your message and invite a response. Remember that communications, by definition, is two-way.

Communicate Often and Appropriately

While this seems like a “no-brainer,” it is rarely done as we are all far too busy and often assume that our communication requirement is the same as others. We take short cuts to save time and pick the expedient path to communicate. Unfortunately there is no short cut to good communications... you need to take the time to do it well and be sensitive to the needs of others.

We all recognize the importance of teamwork but sometimes forget that a critical enabler is open, honest, and effective two-way communications. Find ways to level the playing field, and encourage honest and open dialogue. Take the time to tailor your messages to the individual and the circumstances. Communicate clearly, completely, and often.

David Oman enjoys working with leaders to build cultures that are growth-oriented and flexible in the face of constant change. He is a highly regarded consultant, facilitator, and change agent who believes in blending theory with practice to provide common sense approaches to building engaging organizations. David is the principal of the Convergence Consulting Group (www.convergencegroup.net).