A Redefined Communication-Rule Approach to Organizational Culture during Work-From-Home

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ABSTRACT

Work-From-Home is the new accepted work culture norm and as much as it is the need of the hour and is recommended, it also changes the dynamics of conventional communication within an organization. The conundrum at the heart of this study was to understand how the communication patterns and meanings have changed within an organization and are there some communication strategies that can be redefined in order to meet the challenges of demands exerted by work from home culture. A qualitative approach was used by conducting in-depth interview with senior level managers from seven different organizations. The data was analysed using thematic network into global, organizing and basic themes. Some major themes that emerged under the global theme "Domains of communications experiencing change" were informal communication, lack of empathy, mistrust, delegation, team work and feedback. Under the global heading "methods to redefine communication-rule approach" the major themes that emerged were awareness, virtual social connect, recognising good work, training for better communication and emotional intelligence. This study is an effort to analyse the communication gap that organizations are experiencing due to restricted and virtual work culture and also attempts to give some strategies to overcome those communication barriers reinforcing a conducive organizational culture.

Introduction

Organizations cannot exist without communication. Communication is a central variable in organizations and to a very large extent communication establishes the organisational culture. A sound communication strategy is crucial and to any culture transformation initiative. Communication is defined as a transition or information transition and understanding using symbols together from one person or group to another party and those symbols can be either verbal or nonverbal (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980). Judge (S. Robbins & Judge, 2009) further redefined

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communication as a relationship or interaction that occurs between superiors and subordinates (downward communication) or from the subordinates to superiors (upward communication) or among fellow workers (horizontal communication) and or communication across channel in order to achieve organizational or individual goal (Muharto, 2014).

Researches done in the area of organizational communication invariably base it on our conventional understanding of an organizational setup. What happens to communication-rule approach due to dynamics related to work from home? Is it prudent to carry on with the traditional communication-rule models or should we attempt to redefine it in the context of new work norms? This research paper attempts to understand how the variables of conventional communication have gone through a change when people are using virtual platforms for establishing and understanding communication.

Several prior research shows that virtual teamwork is at a disadvantage when it comes to establishing communication richness available to face-to-face teams (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004) and that traditional teamwork problems such as conflict and miss-coordination can trigger and quickly move in virtual teams (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). If the work culture goes through a change, it does impact the nature and flow of communication impacting the efficiency of the organization. When employees are co-located, they experience organizational culture, tradition, and rituals in a more spontaneous, visual, and nonverbal way than do their remote counterparts. Research has shown that rituals and routines, which are often enacted in casual talk, are sources for understanding (Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002), and that nonverbal cues are important sources for reducing uncertainty which can lead to greater interpersonal trust (Walther, 1992; Walther and Tidwell, 1995).

Hence it becomes essential to analyse the changing nature of work and communication in order to meet the challenges posed by it.

Methodology
This is a qualitative research which utilizes an enquiry method to gather data and analysis using qualitative research methodology approach. This study uses phenomenological theoretical paradigm which analysis the lived experiences of people.

Objective
The major research concern was
1) To study how the communication-rule approach and meanings have changed within an organization.
2) To analyse some communication strategies that can be redefined in order to meet the challenges of demands exerted by work from home culture.

Sample size and Sampling Technique
Sample size was 7 senior level managers from different organizations. Purposive and theoretical sampling technique was used in order to reach the desired number.

Data Collection
Data was collected using a semi structured in-depth interview, which was recorded

and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed used thematic networking. It is a qualitative analysis method that includes conducting thematic analysis of textual data and then presenting it as "thematic networks-web like illustrations (networks) that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text (Attride-Stirling, 2001)

Result and Discussion

The following tables illustrate the various global, Organizing and sub-themes that were generated in order to gain an enhanced understanding of the research objective.

Table 1.1 Global Themes 1-2 and their Organizational Themes that Illustrate Changed Communication-Rule Approach

	GLOBAL THEME	ORGANIZING THEME	BASIC THEME
1.	Domains of communications experiencing change	1.1 Informal communication 1.2 lack of empathy	1.1.1 Delegation 1..1.2 Team work 1.1.3 Feedback 1.2.1 Mistrust
2.	Methods to redefine communication-rule approach	2.1 Awareness 2.2 Training for better communication	2.1.1 Virtual social connect 2.1.2 Recognising good work 2.2.1 Emotional intelligence

1. Domains of communication experiencing change

On understanding the major domains of communication that are impacted by the virtual work space / work from home, it was established that there are two distinct channels of communication that is majorly impacted. The process of informal communication and the lack of empathy emerged to be significant themes as the nature and frequency of the informal communication has gone through a drastic change and one very crucial aspect missing in the virtual world communication is the empathy factor people are not able to establish that when everyone is physically / geographically apart.

1.1 Informal Communication

For purposes of this study, informal communication in work settings is defined as voluntary talk that does not have to be solely work or task focussed. Every type of organization has an informal communication environment. Whether employees are in close proximity or geographically apart, they need informal communication in order to fulfil their personal, social, and work needs (Fay M.J, 2011). Informal communication is more personal and helps build relationships. Remote working does not allow the spontaneity of communication and employees thus are not either able to indulge in it or the ones who are indulging find it to be very effortful and time consuming process. If we take the account of informal communication during work from home within an organization, we can see a very minuscule percentage of people indulging in it. One of the participants expressed the importance of informal

communication in the organisation as:

"Employees are now only getting connected on work related issues and the personal talks are missing, leaving most of them feeling alienated or frustrated. Earlier in the middle of work, it was normal to find employees sharing lighter moments and bonding but now that important channel of communication is out."

(Personal Communication, 29th May 2021)

1.1.1 Delegation

Most of the participants felt that the way delegation of work took place earlier has now changed to a very large extent. As Bass said, "delegation implies that one has been empowered by one's superior to take responsibility for certain activities" (Bass, 1990). Delegation and empowerment go hand in hand. It has been found that empowerment is a motivational concept related to self-efficacy. People experience psychological empowerment when they feel responsible for meaningful tasks. They also feel empowered when they believe they are competent and have the ability to make a difference. Somehow virtual delegation is leading to more responsibilities but not empowerment as there is lack of informal communication which helps you to understand other variables attached to one's work. Several earlier studies indicate that empowerment was conceptualized as a leader behaviour and is very close to delegation delegation (e.g., Locke and Schweiger, 1979; Miller and Monge, 1986; Cotton, 1988, 1993). It is widely accepted that delegation is not just assigning work rather it involves handholding and consulting too. In the given remote work situation delegation is challenging as handholding and the consultation that goes with delegation is not at the optimum level. As one participant reported:

"I am finding it difficult to delegate work as when you meet people virtually, the motivation and the empowerment factors do not work as efficiently as it was when you meet them in person. The handholding which goes with delegation is not a trusted process any more as people have this perception that they are generally working alone and the support that they need in order to carry on the delegated duty is not easily achieved."

(Personal Communication, 30th May 2021)

The above lines communicate that though delegation is an important managerial function but it is achieved only when the informal communication of assurance and hand holding is present.

1.1.2 Teamwork

Success of any work depends upon the cohesiveness of the team. Virtual working does not facilitate the process of team building as the sense of isolation is very strong in remote working. Generally employees experience a sense of alienation and that disrupts the functioning of the team. It is not just the sense of isolation (Monge and Contractor, 2001; Reinsch, 1997), remote work has been linked to an increase in a sense of loss and detachment (Hylmo and Buzzanell, 2002), reduced visibility (Reinsch, 1997). Teams are not just built with formal boundaries but mostly through informal connect and it is not achieved overnight. When people interact and indulge in informal chit chats or casual, personal conversation they tend to bond and form a mental connect, which is missing in virtual works as people are generally doing the teamwork as per the final guidelines which doesn't result in the formation of a

cohesive team. As reported by one participant:
"It's difficult for people to find the connect with the team as they have a strong sense of isolation. My team feels detached and they have a sense of loss of people around them."

(Personal Communication, 29th May 2021)

1.1.3 Feedback

Informal feedback is known for spontaneous and less rigidly structured with a personal touch. It generally occurs at any time or location in real time. Informal feedback is more immediate, and it can instantly impact an employee's day-to-day performance because here you do not wait for a certain time in future to communicate, rather it occurs more at a personal and immediate manner. Research indicates that a feedback which is immediate is always more effective. One participant reported as "

"Feedback system is suffering. Giving feedback in the virtual world is seldom immediate and effective. Sometimes it's the non-verbal cues that are enough in proving a feedback but we cannot use it anymore. Employees are not getting the feedback the way they are supposed to receive "

(Personal Communication, 29th May 2021)

1.2 Lack of Empathy

One of the most crucial areas of concern is the lack of empathy that people in the organizations are experiencing. Empathy enables us to learn from others' emotional experiences and to know when to extend support. Also, because we are not in close vicinity or physical proximity, occasionally we forget that we are also working with people who have their personal lives, families, and problems. We get caught up in our personal situation and neglect to pay attention to how others may be feeling. In other words, we forget empathy for others. Communication is more a matter of trust and acceptance of others, their feelings and ideas that are different and that, from their point of view, have the same intellect (Ruck & Welch, 2012).

1.2.1 Mistrust

Lack of empathy is leading many employees to have trust issues. Informal communication has been accepted widely for greater "cognitive authority," since people tend to trust informal sources more than formal ones (Leenders and Gabbay, 1999). Since grapevine is an important source of informal communication and people have a tendency to trust it more, that channel of communication is very weak when people work remotely leading to lack of trust. As reported by one of the participants:
"I find the trust factor not building. Virtual world doesn't allow empathetic conversations and hence I find my employees going through a feeling of mistrust and also miscommunication."

(Personal Communication, 30th May 2021)
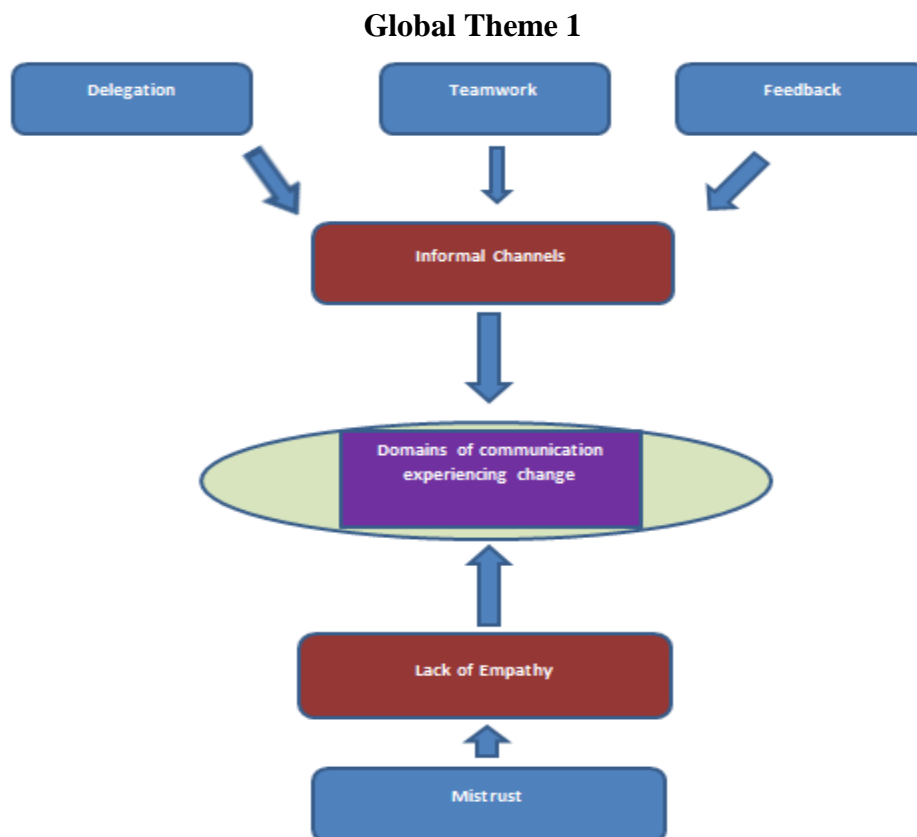
Global Theme 1

**Figure 1.1- Thematic Network 1 Illustrating Global Theme 1 and
Related Organizing and Basic Themes.**

2. Methods to Redefine Communication-Rule Approach
Since the process of communication has gone through a drastic change, it is imperative to look into some methods that could help us redefine the boundaries and meaning of communication which adapts to the virtual work from home scenario.
2.1 Awareness
Many participants reported the power of generating awareness around the dynamics of remote working. It has been observed through several researches that "Awareness of the self is both a *tool* and a goal" (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). The first step here would be first to acknowledge the fact that we are living in change times and this would require a different strategy. Getting the employees together and clearly communicating the challenges is an essential step towards change management. As one of the participant reported:
"*I recommend calling up and addressing everyone and the first step is to acknowledge the fact that our communication is impacted and has changed. Acknowledging the fact that things have changed is a phenomenal step towards acceptance.*"

(Personal Communication, 29th May 2021)

2.1.1 Virtual Social Connect
One cannot undermine the power of social connect. In the current remote work scenario, it is very difficult to socialize and hence the connect is missing leading to detachment, loneliness, sense of loss and lack of empathy. Research indicates that

People who feel more connected and emotionally close to others exhibit lower levels of anxiety and depression. Moreover, studies show they also have greater empathy, higher self-esteem, and extend more cooperation and mutual trust. They also indulge in more pro-social behaviour. As reported by one of the participants:

"Since we have allotted days for virtual socializing, the communication and connect is getting better. People need to also understand the limitations of people and accept it. That happens only through informal connections. It is also a de- stressor."

(Personal Communication, 30th May 2021)

2.1.2 Recognising Good Work

Participants reported that earlier reinforcing good work was easy as while people moved in the organization, they wold look at the display boards or circulars mentioning the achievements of employees. But now that is not happening like before hence the leaders have to find a method to communicate the same in the most effective manner. It is absolutely essential that employees who are doing well get the credit for their efforts and somehow we need to incorporate that in the virtual work system.

2.2 Training for Better Communication

Not everyone is a blessed with good communication skills. Especially in the virtual world, as one has restricted access to non-verbal cues, it is essential that the nuances of the remote working and how to establish effective communication should be an essential part of the training module. According to Schulz & Bernd, 2008, effective communication is the key to organizational success. This is a highly trainable area and experts can be engaged in training people in order to first understand the issues and virtual communication and then train them to enhance it. As reported by one of the participants:

"Establishing an eye contact in the virtual work space is difficult and it leaves you with a sense of incomplete conversation. Since I have started training people about the dynamics of virtual communication, it has helped us improve our organizational communication."

(Personal Communication, 29th May 2021)

2.2.1 Emotional Intelligence

According to Vakola, M., Tsaousis, I. and Nikolaou, I. (2004), emotional intelligence is crucial in accepting organizational change. Due to remove working, the dynamics of work place culture has witnessed several changes and it is suggested that we need to build a more emotionally intelligent workforce in order to deal with these changes in an amicable manner. Emotionally intelligent people adjust according to the situation and need. They also score well on empathy and know how to manage their emotions and others emotions well (Salovey & Mayer 1990). As reported by one of the participants:

"All we need is emotionally intelligent managers, who can craft communication strategies based on the need of the people or the hour. Good thing is that to certain extent we can train people to be emotionally intelligent. I think it is the time to work around this. We also need emotionally intelligent people to understand what people are going through and not dismiss it. "

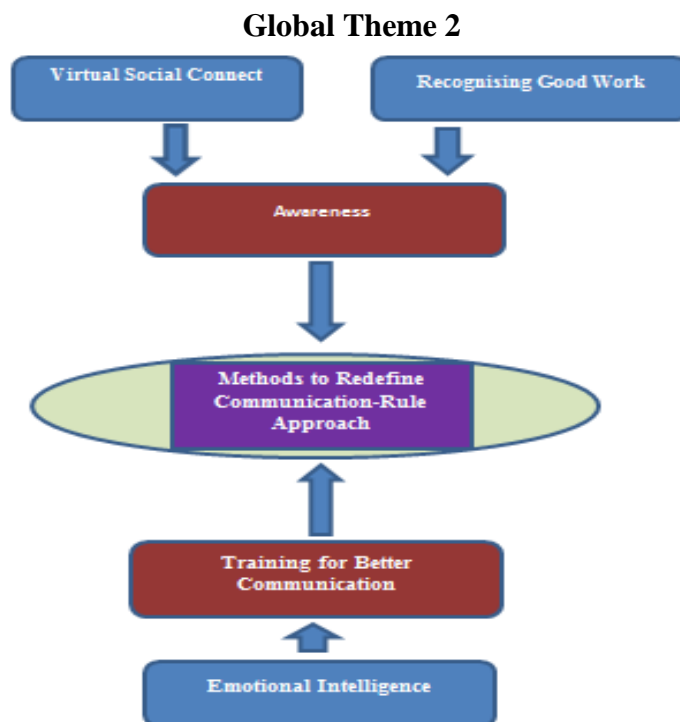(Personal Communication, 29th May 2021)

Global Theme 2

Figure 1.2- Thematic Network 2 Illustrating Global Theme 2 and Related Organizing and Basic Themes.

Major Findings

Some of the major finding of the research is as following

1. There is a need to redefine the communication-rule approach as the work dynamics have changed during work from home culture.

2. Accepting and acknowledging the changed work dynamics is the first step towards building efficient work systems.

3. Investing in empathy and trust building through strengthened informal communication is an essential component.

4. Training is an essential component of establishing better communication.

5. Promoting emotional intelligence at work place will be a beneficial step towards achieving and redefining communication rule approach.

Conclusion

As stated by Harvard Business Review, when people resist organizational change, it's often because they don't have a clear picture of what is happening and why. But when people understand the benefits of a company culture initiative, they are more willing and able to support all of the efforts that will be required to achieve it. Work-From-Home is the new accepted work culture norm and as much as it is the need of the hour and is recommended, it also changes the dynamics of conventional communication within an organization. The conundrum at the heart of this study was to understand how the communication patterns and meanings have changed within an organization and are there some communication strategies that can be redefined in order to meet the challenges of demands exerted by work from home culture. Some major themes that emerged under the global theme "Domains of

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