

Communication in Effective and Ineffective Teams:
A Longitudinal Study Investigating Team Members' Task and
Socio-Emotional Verbal Behaviours

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of communication differences in effective and ineffective teams. It investigates task and socio-emotional verbal behaviours over time and its relationship to team effectiveness and team members' self-perceived member viability. The author used an aural observational method to examine verbal communication of three teams. Participants were post-graduate students formed into teams, working on a complex and dynamic task over a project duration of five days in a classroom setting. Spoken interaction was audio recorded and analysed using Bales' (1950) Interaction Process Analysis (IPA). Three questionnaires were developed, mainly by combining existing measurement instruments from communication and small group research, measuring team effectiveness and member viability.

The analysis of selected team meetings with IPA displayed interesting task and socio-emotional communication differences in effective and ineffective teams. These differences were more visible in socio-emotional interaction than in task-related interaction. Observed interaction patterns changed over time, although communication behaviours were more stable in the effective teams. Findings indicate that a consistently high level of positive socio-emotional communication in combination with a consistently low level of negative socio-emotional interaction seem to facilitate team effectiveness, while a high level of negative socio-emotional interaction or constantly changing socio-emotional behaviour seems to inhibit team effectiveness. It seems to suggest that communication behaviours impact upon team effectiveness and member viability. When communication behaviours could be described as task focused with a consistent level of positive reactions, outweighing negative reactions, effectiveness and member viability can increase. Opposite behaviours, shifting from task to interpersonal issues in combination with negative reactions outweighing positive reactions can lead to low levels of perceived member viability and a lack of effectiveness.

The results lead to the suggestion that communication behaviours and member viability, particularly cohesion and willingness to continue as a member of this team, seem to be indicators for a team's "well-being" and impact upon its effectiveness. These factors seem to be especially visible at the beginning and the temporal midpoint of a project. During these two periods, monitoring of the team process is recommended, either self-managed or with support from outside the team in order to prevent communication problems impacting on team effectiveness.