

KOAN BRIEF

Leading Academic Research for Project Managers

Today - When Bringing the Team Together Doesn't Make it Better



The Koan Brief provides project managers with leading research from top universities in plain, easy-to-read language: plain-speak.

Every summary includes:

1. Key Benefits - what the study includes for active project managers. At a glance.

2. Talk to the Author - how to contact the folks that studied the problem. Or where to find the study for yourself.

3. The Summary - the findings in plain-speak, substituting academic speak for every-day English.

4. Quotes from the Research - for those who want to dive into the details.

The Question: Why, even when you bring teams physically close together, doesn't communication always improve?

The Study: 74 new product teams made up of 437 people (356 team members and 81 project managers)

The Details: Teams tend to improve when they are seated close to each other. But some don't. It depends

on what kind of deadline stress they face. Deadline stress has two types of pressure - challenge and hindrance - creating the psychological distance factor.

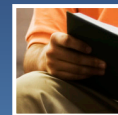
The Findings: For teams to benefit from close proximity their deadline stress needs to have challenge pressure, not hindrance. Hindrance pressure reduces communication and efficiency.

TODAY'S BRIEF

Key Benefits



Identify the factors that prevent teams from improving when they are brought together in close proximity.



Learn what to do to overcome these factors.

Talk to the Author



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The Study Details



Chong, D. S. F., Eerde, W., Rutte, C. G., & Chai, K. H. (2012). *Bringing Employees Closer: The Effect of Proximity on Communication When Teams Function under Time Pressure*. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 29(2), 205-215. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5885.2011.00890.x⁴

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<http://koffeekoans.com/projectnotes>

The Summary



The Research: Key Quotes

The following sections are direct quotes from the study.

On Proximity And Psychological Distance

Although earlier studies on team proximity have generally emphasized its dependence on physical distance between members, we suggest that team proximity is also a function of psychological distance. This is because team members, despite sitting next to one another, are unlikely to share information if they are psychologically distanced, which occurs when people are under intense time pressure (e.g., Hoopes and Postrel, 1999).

On The Three Keys: Awareness, Effort, and Identification

People in close proximity tend to experience team awareness, require less effort to initiate conversation, and experience a strong sense of team

identification. These factors explain the direct relationship between proximity and communication. However, we also expect the relationship to depend on the time pressure experienced by teams because beyond physical distance, challenge time pressure, and hindrance time pressure appear to affect the three underlying factors by altering team members' cognitive and affective readiness and ability to exchange information. We term this mechanism psychological distance.

On Challenge Time Pressure

Challenge time pressure is associated with fulfillment and a strong proclivity to succeed. These experiences serve as a motivating force in teams (Selye, 1982). Under such circumstances, a person with constrained attentional resources can still

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engage vigorously in cognitive activities if he or she is stimulated to persist in the course of action (De Dreu and Carnevale, 2003). Pieters and Warlop (1999) conducted a field study to explore the effects of motivation on how people gather purchasing information under time pressure. The authors found the motivated groups to exert more effort in acquiring information than other groups. This indicates that challenge time pressure can facilitate information exchange. Thus, teams that experience challenge time pressure are likely to experience lower psychological distance between one another.

On Hindrance Time Pressure

In contrast to challenge time pressure, hindrance time pressure is associated with hassles and constraints to goal achievement. Cognitive closure theory suggests time pressure to threaten information exchange if the stress is perceived to be hindering (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996). People in such a situation tend to engage in shallow communication and close their minds to rethink solutions to problems, or even choose not to revisit available information to minimize onerous processing of complex information. This suggests that hindrance time pressure leads people to overlook peripheral information and social cues (Kelly and Loving, 2004). Hence, teams that experience hindrance time pressure are likely to experience higher psychological distance between one another.

On Teams With Hindrances

First, such teams tend not to capitalize on their awareness (knowledge) of the teams' capabilities and resources as they are more concerned about meeting immediate deadlines than exchanging more information, which requires both effort and time (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996). Second, such teams will be more focused on their individual tasks and avoid engaging in conversations despite the physical proximity because of the higher psychological distance (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996). Finally, such teams also tend to experience a weaker sense of team identity as members avoid social cues and are more self-focused in completing their individual tasks (Kelly and Loving, 2004).

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MORE FINDINGS

The Study Composition

The unit of analysis was a team, which could be from a single-team or a multi-team project. When the survey took place, overall 74 teams were still active: in the design (19%), testing (41%), or initial production (31%) stages. In total, 437 informants contributed data to this study, 356 of whom were team members, and 81 were project managers. The teams consisted of 4–18 core members ($x = 7.2$, standard deviation [s.d.] = 3.8); 94% were male; the average age was 38 years (s.d. = 7.9); the average time with the current team was 2.5 years (s.d. = 2.3)

Why Is Challenge Stress Good?

Challenge time pressure is associated with fulfillment and a strong desire to succeed. These experiences serve as a motivating force in teams (Selye, 1982).

Under such circumstances, a person, despite being busy, will still engage the team and respond to innovations and ideas. They will consider new approaches, listen to teammates, and explain their own research and findings in ways that teams working with hindrance pressure will not.

Research Quotes: On How To Make Things Better

On Proximity

The results showed that simply locating team members close to one another does not guarantee improved communication. This is especially so for teams functioning in short-cycled industries. The effects of close proximity depend on whether team members are willing to make use of the short distances between one another to exchange information. Management with the intent to adopt collocation as a means to facilitate communication should also attempt to cultivate a work environment where employees experience challenge time pressure. Accordingly, we encourage managers to identify and eliminate factors that cause hindrance time pressure.

On Reducing Hindrance Time

On the one hand, managers could attempt to reduce hindrance time pressure by designing realistic project schedule and deliverables, and by planning downtime in between projects so that teams can recuperate from

high strain projects during these intervals. These can be achieved through active engagements with team members. In addition, providing team members with reasonable levels of autonomy for decision making and managing the frequency of status reporting also helps teams to feel that they are trusted.

On Increasing Challenge Time

On the other hand, managers could increase challenge time pressure by underlining the importance of the project. It is fundamental for managers to understand what challenges the team and induces them to work together. Is it the complexity of a particular technology? Or is it the collective desire to advance consumer life- styles, to develop a sustainable solution, or to see a break- through in a medical field? Managers that are able to keep their teams focused on achieving a goal are likely to witness their teams endure time pressure and perceive it as stimulus. In fact, our time pressure scales show that at the team level, dependency and commitment are two team components that induce team



Hindrance Stress blocks improvement.

Challenge Stress creates it.

members to experience time pressure as a challenge. Based on that finding, we encourage managers to plan activities and training that will help teams to develop a stronger sense of inter-dependency and team commitment before putting them through high time pressure missions.