Building Great Agile Teams Across Time and Space

without fantasy or science fiction

About Me

Josh Kite

Josh is the owner of PIVOT Agile and has impacted Agile adoption at many companies including Equifax, Anthem, L Brands, and PepsiCo.
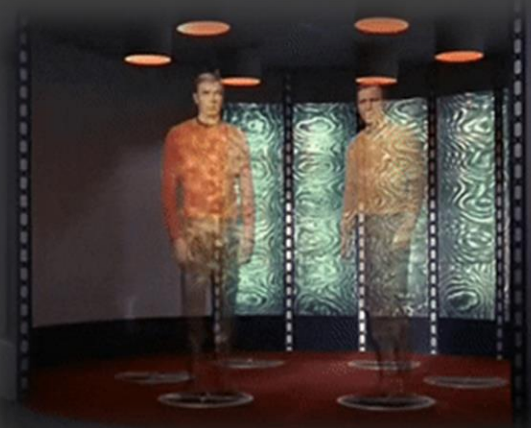
From the Agile Manifesto

The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.

How Does Face to Face Work

When we're scattered around the world or in a pandemic?

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And We Don't Have the Right Tools?

Why is Face to Face so Important?

Face to face discussions presume and promote connections in

- Official (formal) communication

- Unofficial (informal) communication

Face to face allows for

- Efficient communication

- Rich communication through
  - Voice
  - Body language

It is the responsibility of leaders to ENCOURAGE and MODEL good connection creation, as this will develop a solid team
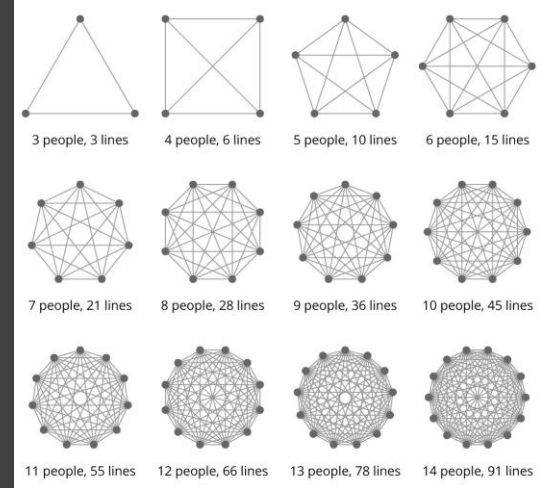
Facets of Communication

Face to Face examples

Lines of Communication

How many people need to collaborate?
As that number increases, the lines grow mathematically

lines(n) = $\dfrac{n(n-1)}{2}$

15 people = 105 paths of communication

3 people, 3 lines 4 people, 6 lines 5 people, 10 lines 6 people, 15 lines

7 people, 21 lines 8 people, 28 lines 9 people, 36 lines 10 people, 45 lines

11 people, 55 lines 12 people, 66 lines 13 people, 78 lines 14 people, 91 lines

Official Communication

Provides:

- What is the business doing?
- Why is the business doing it?
- What is the call to action?

Examples:

- Corporate Updates
- Organizational Announcements
- User Stories
- Status Reports

Unofficial Communication

Why important?

- Forms a sense of "us"
- Enables teams to form an identity
- Builds relationships
- Builds trust

Face to Face examples:

- Water cooler & hallway
- Lunch
- Office celebrations
- Personal pictures

Unofficial Communication

Why important?

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- Builds relationships
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Compensate with:

- Intentionally form connections
- Be explicit about connecting to others to learn about them
- Find commonalities
- Build a team through intentional relationships
- Rally around common challenges

Team "random" channels, DMs, calls, video chats, virtual lunches, team virtual social time etc.

Rich Communication

- Rich communication promotes common understanding

- The less rich the communication, the greater the chance of misunderstanding

- Examples include:

  - Non-verbal expression / body language / facial expression

  - Tone of voice / inflection

  - Graphics / videos

"I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."
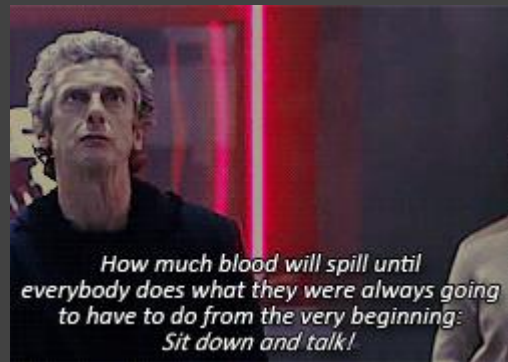
Effective Communication

Broad Messaging

- **Clear** business communication
- Align on message privately **before** communicating broadly
- Communicate **early** & **often**
- **Confirm** your message was received and understood

Official Team Communication

Knowing when (and where) to document in order to supplement virtual face to face communications:

- ALMs (Jira, Rally, VersionOne, AzDev etc.)
- Wikis / SharePoint / Confluence
- Team channels (business focused)
- Emails
- BVIR
- Team virtual syncs on the work (regular, scheduled time)

How much blood will spill until everybody does what they were always going to have to do from the very beginning: Sit down and talk!

Great Dispersed Teams in Action

We have to actively work to overcome the

gaps that exist in dispersed teams

Trust Building Examples

Get to know each other

- Where are you from?
- Family information (as appropriate, of course)
- Personal interests
- Business background
- Identify common ground

Respect and appreciate cultural differences

Show authentic interest

- Travel ~~plans and~~ experiences
- Current home office
- Career goals
- Health issues (as appropriate)
- Family concerns

In nine hundred years of time and space I've never met anyone who wasn't important before.
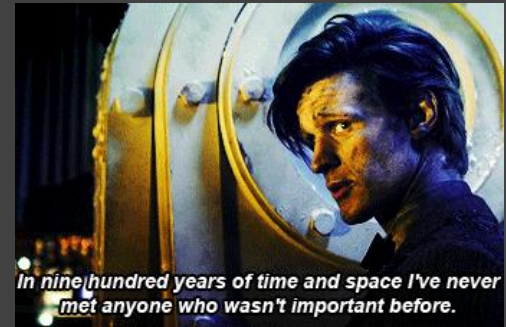
Trust Building

These conversations are a natural, normal part of a face-to-face work environment

They are as important, if not more, when working with distributed teams

Focused attention and additional effort is required to make them happen when working with dispersed colleagues

The greater the psychological distance (time zone, culture, language, etc.) the more investment is required to create the same amount of trust

When these kinds of conversations do not take place, trust will not be built, and the team will function, as best, as a loose group of individuals

Communications Equipment Inventory

Understand each team member's communication options

- Reliable and clear landlines? Headset available?

- Reliable and clear mobile? Headset available?

- VOIP (Skype, Whatsapp, etc)? Microphone?

- Video (Skype, Sococo, Slack, Zoom)?

- Group Chat (Teams, Skype, Slack)?

- Screen sharing (Zoom, Teams, Discord)
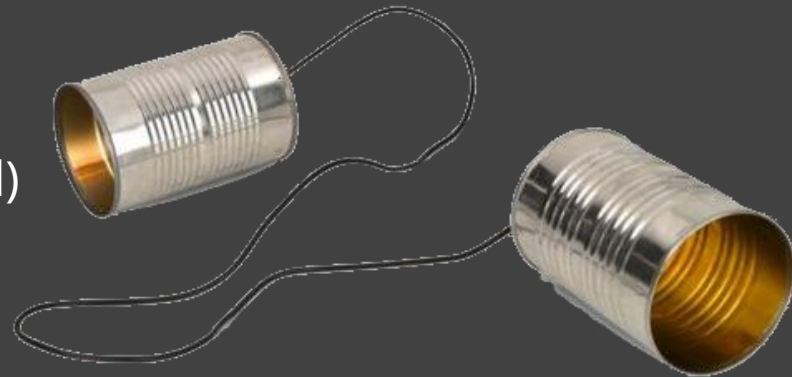
Facility Inventory

Understand everyone's location

- ~~Conference rooms?~~
- Home office setup?
- Kids or dogs?
- Video conferencing?
- Safe working hours?

The more questions you ask, the more you learn

Good Communications Protocol

Be rich!

- Use many options simultaneously
- Use some pre-prepared material
- Take vast notes while sharing screens
- Co-create documents & whiteboards

Be fair!

- ~~Groups together in different rooms~~
- Everyone join individually
- Designate someone to represent those who are not present
- Degrade to lowest common richness

Providing the same experience for everyone builds trust by eliminating any sense that one person or team is experiencing more or less than another

Have Personal Conversations

Request permission to chat one-to-one with team members

- Permission from individual team members
- Permission may be required from their managers
- Worthwhile investment to take away from "productive time"

Be respectful of your team members' comfort level with informal communication

How long before you trust me?

Have Personal Conversations

Select communication method

- Some may prefer voice, others IM, others video; respect their choice
- Multi-modal may help with language; supplement voice with text

It is the leader's responsibility to adjust his or her working hours for personal conversations

Repeat often! Make it a point to personally talk with each team member regularly

Richer conversation is more important at the start.

Regular connection (even if less rich) is more important over time.

Working Together

- Working Agreements are the lifeblood of a dispersed team
- Agree on tools / expectations
- ~~Get on a plane~~
- Agree on working hours across timezones

Agreeing on what tools work for what types of communication allows for a better shared experience for everyone involved

Example Schedule

Event	Facilitator	Tech	Tech Owner	ATL	New Delhi	Mexico City
Daily Standup	Maria (SM)	Teams Screen Share (from home)	Maria (Jira Screen Share)	9:00 am	7:30 pm	8:00 am
Sprint Planning Alternating Wednesday	Adam (PO)	Zoom Video	Maria (Jira Screen Share)	9:30 am to 11:00 am	8:00 pm to 9:30 pm	8:30 am to 10:00 am
Sprint Demo & Retro Alternating Tuesday	Maria (SM)	Conf Room Video (all in offices)	Gabriel (Dev) (Confluence + video screen share)	8:30 am to 9:30 am	7:00 pm to 8:00 pm	7:30 am to 8:30 am
Backlog Refinement Thursday	Adam (PO)	Conf Bridge [# for all countries in Confluence] Lync	Sophia (QA) (Jira Screen Share)	10:00 am to 11:00 am	8:30 pm to 9:30 pm	9:00 am to 10:00 am

Credits

The information in this deck is inspired by several sources including:

- *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie
- *Communicating and Collaborating: How Distributed Teams can Thrive* presentation at Agile 2016 conference by Mark Kilby and David Horowitz
- *Introduction to Agile with Distributed Teams: Working with Remote Team Members* presentation at Agile 2015 conference by Jutta Eckstein
- Personal experience, interviews, and corporate experiments

Contact Me

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Thank you!