

Is communication really terrible?

I have spent much of my consulting and leadership career breaking down damaging silos in organisations. So I was struck, when researching [the D-word](#), to read a book¹ that quoted Jeff Bezos's statement that "communication [between teams] is terrible" but then, two pages later, extolled General Stanley McChrystal, whose winning strategy against Al Qaida in Iraq had featured a daily 7,000-person videoconference between teams across the globe. Both leaders were conspicuously successful, so how could both be right? Digging deeper, I found both that the positions of Bezos and McChrystal are not as opposed as it might seem, and that both had much in common with some of the latest thinking on future organisations. There are lessons to draw for any of us seeking to lead in situations demanding speed and agility – the very conditions we face in the Digital world.

Communication can be terrible

Bezos has structured Amazon into a series of small teams, each "no bigger than what two pizzas can feed", so that the number of links between team members – which rises exponentially with team size – remains manageable.² In a conscious decision to model his organisational architecture on Amazon's service-oriented software architecture, Bezos decreed³ that such teams had to expose their data and functionality through service interfaces and communicate using *only* those interfaces (what has been described as "no informal communication in the hallway"). It was at an offsite meeting where it was suggested that there needed to be more communication between such teams that he declared that "communication is terrible".⁴ Why might he have said this?

- **Communication can throttle progress** – To maintain competitive advantage, Bezos wanted his teams to operate as fast as possible. The definition of clear interfaces for each team meant that *how* teams implemented what was behind the interface was up to them ("It doesn't matter what technology they use") so communication with others was unnecessary and wasteful. As economist Tim Harford puts it: "Bezos's point was that small teams should get on with achieving things rather than constantly checking with one another".⁵ Harford draws a parallel with military doctrine – observing that an analogous use of fast-moving, small, independently operating teams underpinned the success of the new-born SAS in WW2 – and quoting USAF colonel John Boyd (a pioneer of agility in military doctrine, most famous for his invention of the OODA-loop) arguing "that synchronisation was for watches, not for people; trying to synchronise activities wasted time and left everyone marching at the pace of the slowest".
- **Communication can confuse** – Most of us have experienced the challenges of "informal communication in the hallway". Is the information right? If conflicting information is passed in two different exchanges which is to be believed? Organisational theorist Eliot Jaques observed that the "organisation structure as it is represented on the official organisation chart" was "at best only a very rough approximation to what is actually going

¹ REILLY Tim, *WTF: What's the future and why it's up to us*, Penguin Random House, 2017

² See <http://blog.idonethis.com/two-pizza-team/> for an explanation

³ See for one account: <http://blog.idonethis.com/amazon-team-communication-service-oriented-architecture-apis/>

⁴ DEUTSCHMAN Alan, *Inside the Mind of Jeff Bezos*, Fast Company, 2004, retrieved from <https://www.fastcompany.com/50106/inside-mind-jeff-bezos-5>

⁵ HARFORD Tim, *Messy: how to be creative and resilient in a tidy-minded world*, Little, Brown Book Group, 2016

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on, if you can even make sense of it” and that the organisation “as different people assume it really works” was “likely to have as many variations as you have people, [producing] confusion”.⁶ Bezos’s insistence on adherence to clear interface definitions avoids just that confusion.

But communication can also be essential

General Stanley McChrystal commanded the Joint Special Operations Task Force in its victory over Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI). The special forces under his command, founded in that tradition to which Harford refers, were made up of highly effective teams, accustomed to operating independently:⁷

“[T]hey trusted one another and within their units they had a clear and shared sense of purpose. They were adept at responding instantaneously and creatively to unexpected events. But all that behaviour stopped where the edge of the team met the wall of the silo.”

However, this mode of operation proved no match for the complexity of the challenge.

“The teams were operating independently – like workers in an efficient factory – while trying to keep pace with an interdependent environment. We all knew intuitively that intelligence gathered on AQI’s communications and operations would almost certainly impact what our operators saw on the battlefield, and that battlefield details would almost certainly represent valuable context for intel analysis, but those elements of our organisation were not communicating with each other.”

McChrystal’s solution – inspired by the realisation that AQI owed its success up to that point to the fact that “even if their nodes were weak, their network was strong” – was to network his teams together into a “team of teams”. A centrepiece of the approach was the daily Operations & Intelligence (O&I) videoconference, involving personnel from all teams with the objective of building “shared consciousness” of the operational situation. One participant describes it as:⁸

“thousands of personnel – thinking strategically as a group; talking and asking for things from one another. [...] When a discussion led by a civilian subject-matter expert in Islamabad touched on the actions of a particular insurgent cell in Helmand, an attuned participant from a tactical team might sense, based on the analyst’s comments, that his team was seeing the consequences of this insurgent cell’s actions emerge in their own battlespace – a realisation he’d then share with the forum’s other participants.”

This mode of operation seems very different from that described for Amazon. But the key difference is rooted in the demands of the mission and environment. Amazon’s mission could be partitioned into well-defined services, and the need for operational shared consciousness could be limited to knowledge of service interfaces. The complex, even chaotic, environment of the war against AQI demanded shared consciousness at a very different level, to which “team of teams” was a manifestly appropriate response.

Looking beyond that environment-driven difference, there are similarities in deeper approach from which we can learn.

⁶ JACQUES Elliot, *Requisite Organization*, Cason Hall, 1989

⁷ MCCRYSTAL General Stanley et al, *Team of Teams: new rules of engagement for a complex world*, Portfolio Penguin, 2015

⁸ FUSSELL Chris, *One Mission: how leaders build a team of teams*, Pan Books, 2017

How to avoid terrible communication

Radical decentralisation to small, empowered teams

McCrystal's small tightly-knit teams were already steeped in the military doctrine of Mission Command, under which teams are empowered to determine for themselves the best approach to achieving their mission objectives. However, McCrystal took empowerment a step further, delegating authority, for example, not just over how a strike was to be carried out, but *whether* it was to be carried out. "We decentralised until it made us uncomfortable, and it was right there – on the brink of instability – that we found our sweet spot".

Bezos's "two-pizza teams" are not only empowered to determine how to deliver to their declared interface, but are cross-functional to avoid dependence on central functions. "Each has its own software developers, its own business people, its own design people and so on," [Bezos] explained. 'I think that kind of decentralization is important for innovation because your hands are closer to the knobs of what you're trying to build.'"⁹

These examples are not unique. Further examples are quoted by Frederic Laloux in his research on the emergence of self-managing organisations, his diverse examples of which include French automotive supplier FAVI and US tomato processor Morning Star.¹⁰ One of the best known examples he quotes is that of Buurtzorg, an innovative, patient-centred social-care provider founded in the Netherlands in 2006, whose methods are being adopted in other countries (including currently ongoing pilots in the UK) following its conspicuous success.

Buurtzorg's teams, each of 10-12 nurses, serve groups of around 50 patients and are responsible not only for care but for all management and operational aspects. The teams are fully empowered: self-managing, with the organisation providing only coaching support (*not* control) and central functions making up less than 1% of the organisation.

Clear, shared, purpose-centric culture, embodied by senior leaders

A shared sense of purpose and behavioural norms simplifies communication, reducing both the need for it – as so much can be assumed to be already understood – and the likelihood of misunderstanding.

We heard earlier of John Boyd's aversion to "synchronisation" in military operations. While Boyd was deeply opposed to *unnecessary* coordination, and urged that communications be kept to a minimum for the sake of both speed and secrecy, he did recognise the need for *necessary* communication. Wherever possible, this was to be "implicit" – leaving unsaid what was already understood, based on shared knowledge of purpose and norms – so that "explicit" communication was kept to a minimum. As Boyd put it, describing a WW2 German forces approach that he had subsequently applied in USAF fighter pilot training:¹¹

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/innovatorsdna/2013/08/14/the-secret-to-unleashing-genius/#15508e0f361c>

¹⁰ LALOUX Frederic, *Reinventing Organisations*, Nelson Parker, 2014 – cited as one of 19 leading management thinkers in the Spring 2019 issue of *Professional Manager* in the context of the Chartered Management Institute's *Management 4.0* project

¹¹ BOYD John, *Discourse on Winning and Losing*, transcription of oral lecture given in 1989, retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5497331ae4b0148a6141bd47/t/5af842f8758d4615555d3f6d/1526219514965/Patterns+of+Conflict+Transcript.pdf>

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“What they’re really doing, if you look at their whole operational philosophy, based upon a common outlook, freedom of action, realised through their concepts of mission, etc, they emphasise implicit over explicit communication.

“In other words, since they have a common outlook, it’s like in a family, and you and I are good friends. I don’t have to give you detail on what to do. I just give you an order or two, and you’re on your way. In other words, that one word is dripping with information, so you don’t have to say too much.”

McCrystal was able to rely on the strong culture already build in the forces he was commanding, but put significant emphasis on his personal role in embedding and embodying the team-of-teams culture: “Creating and maintaining the team work conditions we needed – tending the garden – became my primary responsibility. My most powerful instrument of [communicating priorities and cultural expectations] was my own behaviour.”

Analogously, Bezos has repeatedly reinforced Amazon’s mission of customer-centricity and, indeed, this is embodied in the decentralised service-oriented which has: “turned internal company collaboration into a process of customer-to-customer interaction, furthering [Bezos’s] goal of making Amazon the most customer-centric company in history.”¹²

For similar reasons, the progressive firms researched by Laloux invest significantly in their induction processes. For example, the importance of the role of Buurtzorg’s onboarding process in embedding purpose and culture is evidenced by the CEO’s insistence on participating in every induction.

*Fostering **necessary** communication between teams*

Having recognised the need for inter-team communication on an unprecedented scale, McChrystal put significant investment into enabling video communication “to reach every component of our force and our partners, from austere bases near the Syrian border to CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia.” Critically, however, the growth of the O&I to encompass all partners came not from central diktat – indeed, McChrystal had no formal authority over many of the organisations involved – but from the *necessity* of the communication.

“In time, people came to appreciate the value of systemic understanding. O&I attendance grew as the quality of the information and interaction grew. Eventually we had seven thousand people attending almost daily for up to two hours.”

The organisations researched by Laloux have developed clear, transparent mechanisms for inter-team communication and coordination. Resource allocation and load balancing between teams at automotive part manufacturer FAVI, for example, is achieved through a regular peer-to-peer discussion by a group of representatives from each team (rather than, for example, through a central operations function). The resolution of questions requiring expert input at Buurtzorg is through the use of social networking technology.

Even in Amazon, there was a willingness to introduce additional communications mechanisms across teams when this proved *necessary* to exploit the opportunities offered by AI. *Wired* describes¹³ Amazon’s move from a position where “Amazon’s AI talent was segregated into isolated pockets. [...]They were AI islands in a vast engineering ocean” to one where “the company’s AI expertise is

¹² <http://blog.idonethis.com/amazon-team-communication-service-oriented-architecture-apis/>

¹³ *Inside Amazon’s Artificial Intelligence Flywheel*, *Wired*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/amazon-artificial-intelligence-flywheel/>

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now distributed across its many teams – much to the satisfaction of Bezos”. A key part of the change was the enabling of *necessary* communication:

“While there is no central office of AI at Amazon, there is a unit dedicated to the spread and support of machine learning, as well as some applied research to push new science into the company’s projects. [...] ‘It’s important that there’s a place that owns this community’ within the company, [the leader of the Core Machine Learning Group] says.”

Conclusion

Communication between can indeed be terrible. It can waste time and cause confusion in this Digital age where velocity is critical. However, to the extent that one’s external environment is chaotic and unpredictable, communication between teams can be critical to allow one’s organisation to adapt quickly.

The examples we have looked at in this paper offer some clues as to how to eliminate damaging *unnecessary* communication, and make *necessary* communication as effective as possible:

- Radically decentralise to small, empowered teams, that can work as independently – and hence rapidly – as possible.
- Establish, embed and embody a clear, shared, purpose-centric culture so that those teams are working with aligned intent, and so that communication between them, when it is needed, can be as efficient as possible.
- Where communication *is* needed between teams, explicitly enable and foster it, recognising that the nature of what communication is necessary may vary considerably depending on the nature of the environment: from zero in (pre-AI!) Amazon to the 7,000-person daily videoconference of the war in Iraq.