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# Communication Matchmaking:

**Managing communication styles,  
preferences, and technology**

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# Introduction

The cardinal rule for effective communication is to know your audience. In the context of business, your audience is your teammates. After all, most knowledge workers spend the majority of time working with their coworkers rather than strangers. Aligning the way we communicate with our team to their communication styles and preferences is the single most effective way to communicate more effectively with them.

Doing so is easier said than done, and there's no magic practice that works across all teams and organizations because effective communication depends on three things:

- 1) how individual people best share and receive information
- 2) how generational preferences create preferences for group communication
- 3) which technologies or methods are the best at aligning #1 and #2.

We'll be starting with how individuals process information, then move to how specific cohorts prefer to collaborate, and finally end with the tools that best fit those styles and preferences. We'll avoid the common pitfall of making people fit communication technology and instead make the communication technology fit the people in question. By the end of this article, you'll have a solid grasp of how to enhance communication and collaboration for your team.

## The 4 main ways our brains deal with information

Communication starts and ends in people's brains, yet most of the time, discussions of effective communication focus on what happens *between* people's brains. Let's go closer to the source and consider how our brains deal with information.

There are three main sensory "channels" in our brains: a visual channel, an audio channel, and a kinesthetic channel. Visual learners must see information to learn it; aural learners must *hear* information to learn it; kinesthetic learners must *do it* before they can learn it. A hybrid style is read/write learners, who learn best by reading and writing.<sup>1</sup> Learning addresses the preference individuals have with *processing* information, and we can extend the idea from cases of explicit learning and education to all ways in which we receive information from the external world.

But in the world of business, we aren't just passive receptors of information; we are active transmitters. The way we transmit information also follows the same three brain

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Neil Fleming, *Teaching and learning styles: VARK strategies* (Christchurch, New Zealand: N.D. Fleming).

pathways. We transmit information visually by drawing, sketching, or placing concepts in space. We transmit auditory information by speaking, and we transmit information kinesthetically by touching, using our bodies, building, and so on. For ease of communication, we'll use the words “express” and “expressives” rather than “transmit” and “transmitters.” We're talking about people, after all.

The table below gives a breakdown of processing and expressive styles.

Sensory Channel	Processes Best With	Expresses Best With
Visual (Seeing)	Pictures, colors	Drawing
Auditory (Hearing)	Speech-based activities	Talking
Reading/Writing	Books, text, reading	Writing
Kinesthetic (Doing)	Movement, hands-on activities	Movement, interactive activities

As counterintuitive as it may seem, we should not assume that an aural processor is also an auditory expressive. Some people prefer to listen to others but express through visual means. We also need to take into account that many people who are naturally aural, visual, or kinesthetic expressives may not be comfortable using their native communication style in a professional setting because our culture places more training and education on reading/writing for most professional functions. The exception to this is sales, marketing, executive, and public-oriented functions; typically, the higher we go in our careers, the more we get to build our teams around our preferred communication preferences.

Altering our communication practices so that we align how we share information with how our teammates process information can provide quick wins because it increases the distribution and absorption of company information. A beneficial upside is that making a concerted effort to engage teammates in ways that take their needs into account makes them feel valued; a basic human need is to feel *seen* and *heard* by others. The fact that our metaphors for this are sensory should not go unnoticed.

## Group ideals are based on generational preferences

Communication styles address what's going on in our heads when we communicate. What communication practices we value—that is, the ones we use and understand—are often based on what generation we come from. The three generations currently in the American workforce each have different communication preferences.

Let's take a look at the group dynamic preferences of the three generations. The Boomer generation—people born between 1940 and 1960—generally prefer hierarchal, rule-driven groups. The Gen Xers—born between 1960 and 1980—prefer loose, "as needed" groups. They get together when they need to; think of a pack of wolves that get together only when it's time to hunt. The Millennials—born between 1980 and 2000—prefer interactive, flat groups; they crave feedback and collaboration.

The communication styles of each generation follow their ideal group preferences. Boomers prefer top-down, process-oriented communication practices that allow everyone to know what needs to happen. Xers prefer "information on demand," where only information relevant to an individual's work is shared and required to be known. Millennials prefer interactive group experiences where they get to not only understand what's going on, but understand why decisions are made and possibly have some input into how they're being made.

The table below breaks down these generational group ideals and the ensuing communication preferences.

Generation	Group Preference	Collaboration Style
Boomers (1940 - 1960)	Hierarchal, process-driven groups	Top-down broadcast
Xers (1960 - 1980)	Loose, as-needed groups	Info on demand
Millenials (1980 - 2000)	Interactive, collaborative groups	Interactive group activities

These different communication preferences create havoc in collaboration across most organizations. Here's how this normally plays out:

- Boomer-dominant organizations have frequent, top-down meetings that the Xers hate because so much of it is irrelevant to them, and Xers tend to be anti-authority at heart. The Millennials don't fare much better because they want to work with people, not for them, and crave more context as to what's going on and why.
- Xer-dominant organizations object to "death by meeting" and instead demand that people find ways to work on their own in the absence of top-down guidance.

Boomers see these organizations as lacking direction and leadership, and Millennials have a challenging time figuring out what it takes to be successful in these organizations.

- Lastly, organizations led by early Millennials build in ample collaboration but generally require the technical and managerial experience of Boomers and Xers, who want top-down leadership (for the Boomers) and less interaction so they can do their work (for the Xers).

We can expect the next generation of workers to be conformists and peacemakers because there are four major generational archetypes that appear in recurring cycles: the Dreamer, the Conformer, the Reformer, and the Rebel. The Millennials are the beginning of the cycle (Dreamers), the Xers the end of the last cycle (Rebels), and the Boomers make up the Reformers<sup>2</sup>. The strategic, effective leader will take a keen look at the generational makeup of her organization to both provide for current needs and anticipate future needs.

Generational preferences are meant to convey tendencies, not necessities. There are slight variations in preferences amongst early and late members of a given cohort, with later members of a generational cohort having more of the tendencies of the next generational archetype. Additionally, individuals with parents who are immigrants or from minority groups may actually fall into different generational cohorts due to the influence of their varying culture. This makes looking at the archetype more important than making a conclusion on an individual's preference by their age bracket. A Rebel's age is less important than the fact that she'll likely dislike meetings and constant interaction, which to her amounts to constantly being interrupted and pulled away from what she needs to do. If a teammate's tendencies are falling outside of generational norms, you'd be better off directly discussing their group preferences and collaboration styles with them.

## **Technology: Both the problem and the solution**

Communication styles and preferences, we have seen, address our teammates' heads and hearts. Knowing what's going on inside the brains of our teammates allows us to be smart about the methods by which we communicate because it allows us to use tools that align with those styles and preferences rather than making people fight with tools that are working against them.

The complexity of this matrix of styles and preferences is actually what makes addressing the question of communication technology so challenging. One technological solution won't fit all because one communication practice won't fit all;

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Generations At Work* by Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak and *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* by Strauss and Howe.

using a tool to push a square peg through a round hole is a mark against the person using the tool more than it is the efficacy of the tool. That said, it's easy to misplace our antipathy for specific communication practices onto the technology used to communicate. It's easier to place the blame on email than onto the people who indiscriminately CC everyone to make sure they cover themselves.

Technology becomes a problem in communication practices because it amplifies the ineffective practices already in play. A tool that makes meetings easier also makes ineffective meetings more frequent. A tool that allows us to capture visual information more easily also makes it more likely that we won't take the time to write out the details. And, lastly, tools that facilitate real-time, short-burst communication, like instant messaging, discourage forward planning and communication.

We can use technology to amplify effective communication practices just as easily, though. Knowing that people need to receive visual, auditory, and kinesthetic information, using tools that cater to all forms of communication can help you tend to a multi-generational group. In meetings you might send out an overview of the information covered before hand and use an interactive visual aid while lecturing, then enter into Q&A to make it more collaborative.

Similarly, in communications outside of meetings, social workspaces work well for disseminating information across a group in an on-demand setting. With private social workspaces, Boomers can use a project space to broadcast information that everyone needs, Xers can parse the information on their own schedules and as needed, and Millennials can collaborate and interact with their coworkers all within the space.

It's often the simple technological options that are the most overlooked. Rather than conducting a meeting in a place where kinesthetic learners have to sit still, we can choose to conduct meetings in rooms that give them space to move, write, and manipulate objects while they're learning. Visual expressives would do far better in contexts that allow them to draw than those in which they have to write—a room with a whiteboard and a variety of colored markers is far less expensive than the cost of losing out on their visual insights and explanations. Recording meetings both online and in-person enables auditory processors—as well as Xers—to go back and listen to meetings for things they missed or otherwise need to hear again.

## **A note about face-to-face communication**

Amidst all the technological options, a point to consider is that nothing conveys emotion as well as real interaction. Being able to see someone react to your message results in better communication overall. A new body of neuroscience research has shown that we have mirror neurons that pick up on the emotions and intentions of people we're watching at an unconscious level; our “social brain” is in fact more

powerful than other parts of our brain precisely because our survival has always been so heavily dependent on successful cooperation with others. While human civilization has evolved, our brain hasn't as much.

As David Rock articulates in his book, *Your Brain at Work*, “The more we can see each other, the better we can match emotional states ... real interaction activates more than video, which activates more than telephone, as we are reacting to visual input of body language, and especially facial expressions.”<sup>3</sup>

The challenge with real interaction, though, is that it doesn't scale. If you have a message that you want to get across your organization and you can't get everyone in the same room, web conferencing with video is your best option. The more emotive the message is, the more likely you'll start an emotional contagion. Leaders would do well to share a video talking about the highlights of a plan rather than just having the write-up of the plan.<sup>4</sup>

## Applying what we've discussed

Knowing that your teammates have different communication styles and preferences—and that different technological options favor some more than others—is insufficient; applying the information is what makes the difference.

I've prepared a Team Communication Matrix worksheet that you can use to tailor this information to your team. You'll be able to list up to 10 teammates and their styles, preferences, and the technology options that best match their needs. While it may not be possible to find a fit that matches everyone, this information will at least allow you to figure out the best ways to communicate with them individually.

There is a [free online questionnaire](#) your teammates can take to determine their processing style. This short questionnaire is helpful because many people have never assessed how they best process information. Additionally, it may take some experimentation for people to learn what their expressive styles are. When considering their generational preferences, be careful that you don't simply look at their age.

What steps do you need to take within the next two weeks to tailor your communication practices to align with your team's styles and preferences?

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<sup>3</sup> David Rock, *Your Brain At Work* (New Your: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 169.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Thomas Sy, Stephane Cote, and Richard Saavedra, “The Contagious Leader: Impact of the Leader's Mood on the Mood of Group Members, Group Affective Tone, and Group Processes,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, no. 2 (2005).

## Improving communication online with video

Evaluating communication styles comes down to improving clarity, and nothing helps clarify your message better than giving your audience access to your facial expressions and gestures. In a global world, where teams are distributed by cities, if not countries, it's either impossible or expensive to get everyone in the same room, so video conferencing is the closest you can get to in-person conversations. GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar and GoToTraining all feature built-in HD video conferencing, as well as screen sharing, integrated audio, and annotation tools, so your group communications can be as effective, engaging, and convenient as they need to be to work well for your team. To learn more about taking your communications online, visit [www.gotomeeting.com](http://www.gotomeeting.com).

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# Team Communication Matrix

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Teammate	Expressive Style	Processing Style	Generation Archetype	Technology Fit

Notes:

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