WorkLab 2014: A place where scientist and practitioners meet

Report from the 3rd EAWOP WorkLab, 13-15 November, 2014, Vilnius, Lithuania

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About the authors

Edita and Gintaras both hosted and participated in the 3rd WorkLab in Vilnius in November, 2014 and Solveiga was one of the WorkLab delegates. This report is their reflections and comments about the event (further details ae available at http://www.eawop.org/worklab-2014)

Effective communication – the WorkLab topic

Effective communication is one of the key success factors within any organization. Every company member spends most of their time communicating; regardless of their position within company hierarchy. The need to improve communication has increased over recent years because communication plays such a critical role in so many ways; such as: product or service technology developments; customer relationships; innovation and change management; marketing and sales; and personnel management. In fact, communication is active in virtually every facet of business operations. Moreover, the constant development of communication technologies increases information flow and intensiveness as well as opening new communication possibilities. In this context, on the road towards increased efficiency and effectiveness, organizations continuously handle internal communications with the joint aim of improvement and excellence. It is for these reasons that the 3rd EAWOP WorkLab focused on ways to overcome communication challenges at work.

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WorkLab format

The WorkLab was entitled "*Improved performance through enhanced communication: Getting bosses and staff to talk*". Over a period of three days the workshop provided the opportunity for practitioners and scientists of Work and Organizational Psychology to: a) look at communication issues from different perspectives; b) to investigate participants' case studies; and c) experiment with modern tools designed to enhance communication in a workplace. Further we had the opportunity to sample some aspects of Lithuanian culture and the night life of Vilnius accompanied by our local hosts.

WorkLab content

The first workshop session looked at communication issues from different perspectives. Kathryn Waddington (UK) and Angela Carter (UK) navigated the group through the jungles of formal and informal communication ingeniously. At the beginning of their presentation entitled "*Formal and informal communication in the workplace: what works best?*" they discussed definitions of formal and informal communication. This was an opportunity for everyone to think about these two types of communication in their cultures and describe them to everyone else. Participants sought and discovered examples and forms of formal and informal communication. Then Dr Waddington followed up with some examples and definitions of formal and

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informal communication and highlighted the symbiotic nature of both forms of communication and how they can be viewed as useful for the organization. Dr Waddington then introduced her own research on gossip (Waddington, 2014); seeing it as a lens through which formal and informal communication could be viewed. Participants were given a series of examples to examine and explore. Participants could look at gossip from unusual angles and, although they recognised gossip as largely an informal communication method; they found that managers could benefit from listening to gossip as ways of finding out important information. Moreover, communication was explored in terms of how managers and employees use formal and informal communication. Various obstacles of upward and downward communication between employees and managers were discussed. Dr Waddington linked the theory that she presented with practical experience in the form of case studies and communication tools.

The second WorkLab presentation encouraged participants to practise effective manager-employee relationship facilitation with practical tools and techniques from Deirdre O'Shea (Ireland) and Sarah Brooks (UK). Session tools included:

- **Tool 1: Reflection**
a) Personal Reflection: A tool designed to allow practitioners to reflect on their individual learning about communication in the workplace throughout the workshop. A diary-style template was provided to participants and they learned and used the concept of "*A two-minute purposeful reflection*" during the workshop. This gave participants the possibility to reflect on what they were thinking, doing, or feeling at a specific time within the workshop.
b) Public Reflection: A tool designed to allow groups to reflect on what they learned. This was done virtually using a Linked- In group and physically using a Suggestion Box.

The reflection sessions aimed to highlight the difference between personal reflections and public reflections, how to learn from these reflections, explore why it is useful to reflect and examine some of the reasons why people find it difficult to engage with reflection.

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- **Tool 2: Communicative Space**

This is a tool designed to help people appreciate that different groups of people have different perspectives on communication; and until these differences are made explicit it is difficult to move towards shared communication solutions. A case study looking at elderly care (in the UK; Burns et al., 2014) illustrated how communicative space works, and what the tool's benefits and challenges are. A facilitated discussion helped participants to draw reflections and learn how communicative space could be used in organizations to enhance communication, especially when agreement between different stakeholders is needed.

- **Tool 3: Open Space**

Open Space is a workshop/discussion design tool to use when diverse groups of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways. Open Space helps people to be creative, synergistic, and self-motivated. It is a facilitation method people can use to identify specific issues on a given topic, self-select into discussion groups, and work through the issue with people similarly concerned. At the WorkLab participants chose to discuss several topics such as: the role of emotions in communication; an evaluation of the use of social media in organizations; do men talk and woman gossip; the diversity of gendered communication; and how to enrich cooperation between academics', practitioners' and others. This range of topics yielded plenty of ideas and findings for the participants.

The third form of WorkLab presentation, much appreciated by participants, was small group interactive, facilitated sessions examining real case studies. Participants practised applying the tools and techniques that they had learned within the context of their own workplace communication challenges. In their groups each participant verbalised a detailed description of their chosen case, and were then encouraged to analyse it from the perspectives of formal and informal communication, and then from the stakeholders' viewpoints. Participants then discussed possible solutions and applications of the tools that would benefit their own cases and shared these with the other small groups.

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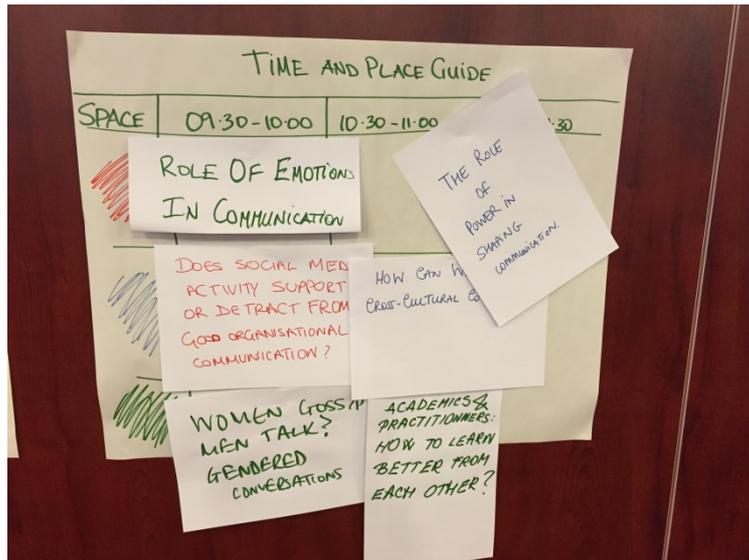
Since the WorkLab participants were consultant practitioners and academic representatives from different countries, everyone had the chance to exchange views, experiences, and share discoveries regarding communication during the event. The WorkLab enabled exploration of particular aspects of communication in various organizations, situations, and cultures.

Participants listed the greatest benefits of the WorkLab at the end of the workshop sessions. Some of these were:

"A chance to expand your views and see different situations from other peoples' perspectives"

"A chance to hear more solutions to your case study from the parallel sessions"

"Colleagues' practical tips trying to solve personal challenges related to communication"

"Working in mini groups where we had a chance to explore specific consulting cases and look for ways to solve communication problems"

"This was a space to explore the value of informal communication"

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Conclusion

In summary, this three-day workshop provided the opportunity for practitioners of Work and Organizational Psychology to work through their own workplace communication case studies. Throughout the WorkLab tools were presented that can be used to enhance communication in the workplace (e.g., communicative space, open space, and reflexive diary). The differences between formal and informal communication were discussed; highlighting the different ways employees speak to their managers and communicate information. Unlike other practitioner events, leading academics in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology and communication worked closely with participants to help shape solutions and develop personal action plans.

The tools and methods offered by the organisers enabled participants to thoroughly explore their own case studies and to consistently reflect and apply the WorkLab content and conclusions of our colleagues to our working practice and our lives.

References

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