What is Your Team's Closeness Factor?

by

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Abstract

Proximity is a significant factor is the efficacy of a team, and the teams ability to be innovative. This article explores the concept of Cumulative Proximity; which is a theory that contends that proximity is more than geographic, and is driven by the the amount and quality of interaction between team members. More over it builds on the theory of Virtual Proximity in that it see proximity more as an emotional state than a physical state, and it applies the concept of Cumulative Proximity to the Return to Office (RTO) movement currently under way in American business.

Keywords: return to office, proximity, management

Do you really need to return to the office?

Among the many pressures facing knowledge worker today is the pressure to return to the office. Many traditional managers see being in the office as an operational imperative; however, many knowledge worker have a very different opinion. There are several reasons that managers favor of returning to the office, including it's effect on culture, team work, operational efficiency, information flow, cohesion, . . .But do we really need to be in the office for all these things to occur? Is this a false dichotomy?

Office as Technology

The first thing that we should probably recognize is that those who are pushing for a return to the office are often looking to achieve the some combination of the goals stated above, and possibly a few other. Offices are often a valid way of achieving those goals. However, the office is not the only way of achieving those goals. The office is at it's core a technology. Meaning it has a common set of features that when used properly can reach a common outcome. So it is a tactic to be used to achieve a specific set of outcomes, and this tactic may come at a cost. The common costs include employee satisfaction, your ability to recruit competitive talent, and the direct costs of acquiring and maintaining an office.

Proximity

The goal of the office is often the development of proximity, and the values that come from that. Proximity, as it is used here, has a meaning that goes far beyond a specific geographic closeness. Proximity is the closeness that is felt emotionally. The early work here goes back to Beckerman (1956) where he described something he called psychic distance. He saw the ability for groups of people to feel close to each other as being based on things they have in common (e.g.: religion, language, culture, education, . . .). Based on these commonalities they could establish relationships. The more they have in common the easier it would be to develop relationships.

Levels of Relationship

In all cases relationships are based on some form of communications. We share ideas, experiences, knowledge, . . .and over time, and after some level of contact is surpassed, we will develop a relationship. Robin Dunbar of Oxford has famously pointed out that the relationships we have can be rated for level of intimacy. He identified at least a half a dozen levels that could be quantified, from your dearest and closest friends, to colleges or people you have a cordial relationship with, to people you recognize but don't know well

at all. Dunbar also recognized that the closer the relationship the more often we are likely to communicate, and as that communications increased so did the efficiency of the communications. More information could be shared with fewer words and there was less error in the process of conveying information.

Media Richness

Dunbar made it clear that not all communications are equal. Anyone who has ever had a text message misread understands this. Text messages often fall afoul of a issue called media richness. Media richness is the ability to carry the complete message with fidelity. The problem with text messages are that they can't capture tone very well. The same words spoken by the sender to a receiver might convey a very different message based on the tone. An innocent message spoken with the wrong tone or emphasis could sound horrible.

So text are about the lowest possible media richness. Phone calls allow for tone so there is a large jump in richness. Video chats are even richer than phone calls. But the richest media is an in person meeting. As we increase the richness of our communications more information is shared and with less error.

Cumulative Proximity

If we analyze our relationships we would also see that the stronger the relationship the easier it is to collaborate. Therefore, the stronger the relationships between knowledge workers on a team, the stronger and more effective that team will likely be. However, Dunbar suggests that the stronger the relationship the more time and effort the team will have to invest in the relationship. And, since we have a limited amount time to effort to invest we have to choose carefully how to invest that capital. We need to know just how much time and effort to invest and in which relationships in order to reach the optimal return.

For example, if you have a work relationship where you share only logistical data that has a low probability for equivocality (being misunderstood or misinterpreted) , than you would not need a strong or rich relationship to achieve top performance. On the other hand, if the data shared has subtlety or nuance, and there is a chance for equivocality, a closer, stronger relationship would improve team performance - at least to a point. In most cases you would not have to be your team member's best friend to reach top performance levels. There is a point of diminishing returns.

Relationship Hygiene

In Hertzberg's two factor theory he discusses how money is more of a demotivate than a motivator. If you don't pay people enough they loose their motivation - so increasing pay at this point can improve motivation. However, Hertzberg claims that there is a point past which increasing pay does not increase motivation. He calls this point hygiene. Ideally you should pay people at the hygiene level for their job and situation. This would maximize performance and minimize cost per unit of performance.

There is also a hygiene level for each professional relationships. Like in Hertzberg's pay example, we will achieve sub-optimal returns if we don't reach the hygiene level for these relationships. If we lack closeness with our team our efforts will be less efficient; however, increasing the relationship beyond hygiene will have limited return.

The Cumulative Proximity Factor (CPF)

We build our relationships through contact. That contact occurs through media, and that media has a richness factor. Imagine that each media that we use has a media rich rating. A rating that would indicate how well this media carriers our message with fidelity.

For example, text messages would be low, a factor of 1 on a scale of 10, and phone calls which are richer might have a factor of 3, video chats a factor or 5, and in-person meeting a factor of 10. Increasing the factor increases the amount of data per word shared, and quality of delivery.

As we communicate, each message would carry a proximity factor that would include the length of the message, the emotional level of the content, and the richness factor of the media under which it was delivered. These would add up to a Cumulative Proximity Factor (CPF-m) for that message. To build our relationship each message builds on the previous messages to build a Cumulative Proximity Factor for the relationship (CPF-r) - this contact level equates to relationship level. And, if we fail to communicate for some period of time there is entropy to the amount of cumulative contact and the corresponding relationship lowering our CPF-r.

As we look to manage our relationship investment, we need to consider a few factors:

- What is the level of relationship required for efficiency? (our teams's CPF-r)
- How will I reach that level?

- And, how will I maintain that level?

Defining the CPF

Like Hertzberg's Two Factor Theory, the CPF is a theoretical framework. The factor you need might be analyzed based on the amount of team communication necessary, and the equivocality of those messages. This might be assessed through the sharing of the concept with the team, and doing regular after action reports to see if the team feels that they are being efficient.

Reaching Your Team CPF-r

Given that each media will have a different level of richness there might in theory be different ways of meeting your CPF-r goals. Media might be selected in combination with each other to meet team needs for geographic and time flexibility, while at the same time meeting the needs for efficient communications. For example, you might have a number of text messages, a few phone calls, weekly video chat, and quarterly meeting to reach your team's CPF-r. While other teams might reach the same goal CPF-r by have a team online forum, and monthly meetings. The point being that both the quantity and quality will add up to help you reach your CPF-r goal.

Maintaining Your Team CPF-r

It is important to recognize that there is entropy in relationships. If we don't do things to constantly refresh them the quality of the relationship will degrade over time. However, the question is the rate of that entropy. If we built our relationship by full time in office contact, could we maintain it through the use of a team forum, and an occasional team meeting. This is theoretically possible, but again this should be monitored by team leadership to look for signs of excessive entropy and loss of efficiency.

Conclusion

The point is there will be no one best way for organizations to stay connected, and to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness. Some might find that high levels of in-person contact is necessary for their situation at present. However, as the quantity and quality of communications tools increase, and as we develop better processes and etiquette on how to use them, the need for high levels of in-person meetings will likely drop. Many companies have already found success with remote only teams. However, even these organizations will, if pressed, typically admit that occasional in-person company or

team gatherings have a positive effect on their team performance, and commitment to the organization.

Bottom-line: do what is best for your team and organization, while recognizing that your model will likely have to be flexible. You will likely have to continuously adapt your model to stay efficient and competitive.