Creating trust and intimacy in the virtual world

Ghislaine Caulat shares the results of her inquiry into how to create the best possible audio working environments for global businesses. Following two years of research about virtual work, this first article focuses on the audio environment as a key communication channel within the virtual working environment.

It is a basic assumption of life in today's global world of work that to create the best work you have to have the best team, regardless of geography. Whether it's because of budgetary constraints that prevent travel, the need to optimise the time of key staff, or 'just-in-time talent' policies, more and more people are working in teams that are enabled through technology. The army of virtual workers is growing and out of all the technological bells and whistles available to facilitate their connection, voice technology is proving the mainstay of communication between team members. Whilst individual members can send and receive information via the web, when it comes to finding a group solution, sharing views and thinking innovatively together, audioconferencing is king. At the hub of the virtual world is the audio environment, in which our aural sense is elevated beyond the other four. What are the implications of such a 'sensory-skewed' way of working?

Much has been written about the basic rules of engagement in the virtual team world. But despite general guidelines, many teams continue to find it difficult to operate as a unit in an environment dependent simply on audiotechnology and the web. For projects to thrive and flourish in an audio virtual world, new skills and a new way of thinking must be introduced. To succeed, audio virtual meetings must be as rich and as multi-layered as face-to-face meetings. Following a two-year period of inquiry and action research with virtual teams, it is possible to provide some observations and pointers that can help teams work at their best in an audio environment.

It would be a mistake to focus merely on how to simply 'get the job done' through an audio environment. If groundbreaking work is to be achieved that is better than the 'sum of the parts', a team must be functioning at its best. The most successful teams are likely to be those that enjoy a high level of trust, are mutually supportive and enjoy working together.

Creating trust and intimacy in a virtual world

As the American consultant and author David Maister has pointed out[1], trust is about knowing that your partner will be reliable, that s/he will deliver against a set of recognisable values and that it is a reciprocal agreement in which both sides participate.

Some of the basic tenets that build trust, such as reliability – the knowledge that a colleague will complete work to a deadline; credibility, knowing that your partner will deliver – can easily be executed in a virtual world. Credentials too, so important in building trust in the face-to-face world, are powerful in the virtual arena.

But there are additional challenges. Because virtual teams are often run in a mechanical manner, they can easily become formatted and formulaic. Deadlines and goal-driven meetings offer little room for the messy, loose, animated conversations that help develop human connection and the all-important personal touch that is critical in developing intimacy, a key ingredient of trust.

Some leaders have found a solution to this problem of technology-driven anonymity by holding introductory, face-to-face meetings to establish relationships and discuss best practice for a project. But what happens when that is not possible? Is it possible to develop trust in a team without everyone having met first?

Every team needs to create its own unique way of working – a code of conduct and a set of connected personal relationships, in other words, an intimate relationship – to really connect. How can we encourage the development of intimacy in the virtual environment, when a team is working in different parts of the world with different cultural backgrounds?

For some, the audio environment can create a greater level of trust than face-to-face meetings. David, a consultant participating in a test group at Ashridge Consulting, described the quality of trust in an audio relationship as stronger than in a face-to-face relationship: "It's like whispering into someone's ear," he said. When asked how he knew when a dialogue was invested with trust he explained, "It is about honesty and I feel it because I feel that I am being trustful myself".

Analysis of behaviour in audio action-learning groups, that enable people to brainstorm business challenges and solutions with a group of peers, suggests participants who developed trust quickly were those used to using the audio action-learning model, regardless of whether or not they have a previous relationship with their co-team members.

Following the second audio meeting in a series of five contracted with an FMCG client, Pierre, a regional sales director based in Dubai, said: "I felt more comfortable (than the first time) because I knew what was going on. It was smoother than the first session. When you don't have visual stimulation, you listen more, you really listen."

Another participant, Carla, a marketing manager based in Italy, illustrated the power of situational trust by explaining that because she was at ease with the process she had been able to relax and open up to the point that she felt she could share a sorrow. Carla went on to say that she felt closer to her team members because she felt that they had empathised with her feelings. It seems the more participants are involved in audio work in the course of their jobs, the more quickly they feel at ease with the situation and develop a relationship of trust with their fellow team members.

Introducing a controlled element of informality to formal meetings can help people relax and connect on a deeper level. There is a real need in any kind of virtual team work to find a way to introduce '"coffee machine" conversations to the group. Planning fifteen minutes of chat time before work begins or organising a virtual coffee break half way through a meeting are two simple ways of letting people across the world build a mental picture of the person they are working with. What did they do over the weekend? What is going on in the area? In this way our sense of emotional connection is built in small, vivid snapshots.

Establishing a completion ritual at the end of an audio session is an effective way to build an emotionally connected relationship amongst team members. Because of the way teleconferences were built as constructs to exchange information or discuss decisions to be taken, many people end sessions in a mechanistic manner that forgets to value the nature of the work that has been accomplished, as well as the quality of the relationships that have been developing throughout the session. The medium has the power to devalue the content.

Fifteen minutes at the end of each call for members of the team to talk about how they feel about the session, what they learnt and what they value in each other, can be very powerful.

Freedoms of the virtual environment

Interestingly, the anonymity of virtual work often encourages more openness amongst team members. The lack of cultural and visual codes that might stop someone from letting their true opinions be known in a face-to-face meeting are not evident in an audio only conversation. This allows all team members to react authentically, focusing on the ideas and concepts under discussion rather than cultural issues.

Minna, a Finnish team leader with a telecoms company, found the freedom of virtual teamwork engaged her in a completely different manner from face-to-face meetings. Rather than sitting formally at a desk she found herself pacing, jumping up when inspired by the conversation. "I was really involved physically in the conversation," she said. "If somebody had been watching me, they would have thought that I was mad! The Finnish culture really restricts face-to-face behaviour,' she added. "Your body movements, to be honest, even your facial expressions, are somehow really restricted. Maybe [audio work] gives you the permission, the freedom to express your thoughts and feelings in a different way."

The anonymity and distance of virtual teamwork can also create a deeper connection, simply by dint of the fact that team members don't have to worry about local politics or hierarchical issues. A virtual colleague, for instance, is unlikely to report a politically inappropriate opinion to your boss. This freedom from the normal constraints of office life means that many people feel able to open up in a way they don't often do.

Equally, hierarchical relationships can be amplified in an unhelpful way by audio work.

Barbara, an HR manager in an FMCG business, works for Claire. In a face-to-face environment, Barbara felt that she had an open relationship with Claire. However, in the virtual environment this seemed to change. The combination of the teleconference setting and Barbara's hierarchical relationship with Claire made it difficult for her to feel safe. She said: "In a sense it would be better not to know the people at all and to be completely unconnected with them. It doesn't matter if they judge you… you have nothing to lose."

A new kind of team leadership

Whilst a leader can assess the attention and / or boredom levels of each participant in a face-to-face meeting, it is not possible in the virtual world. For this reason, virtual leadership requires more versatility than face-to-face leadership. During the course of one meeting virtual leaders must often flex a wide and sometimes contradictory

[1] David H. Maister, The Trusted Advisor, 2001.

set of skills. For instance they may have to act as both coach and prescriber, they may be required to show authority and empathy, and they maybe have to focus on the task at hand and on the social connections between team members. Leaders must also be wary that the traditional rules of teleconference etiquette encourage a culture of advocacy rather than free flowing conversation. If a team leader becomes a debate monitor, asking questions by rote, the conversation can quickly disintegrate, with each team member taking up a defensible position on a topic. Not only is it very hard work for the team leader, but it does little to foster an environment of collaboration, curiosity and discovery, amongst the team.

Whilst working with Sally, David and Sarah on the Ashridge test group, it became obvious that conversation was stilted and not free flowing. When asked to comment on this observation, Sally named the patterns of advocacy that she was noticing, explaining that David would tend to give an opposite view to hers on a specific aspect, instead of both of them inquiring together into the topic in question. She added that David would generally use an inquiry approach, but that the conversational pattern of the teleconference seemed to be encouraging advocacy patterns (as with most of the other teleconferences she had experienced). David commented that because the team leader was directing questions at people he felt that he could not allow himself to "listen in" and felt that he had to answer and take a view on the subject under discussion. In addition, when he was not asked to answer, he felt released and could ease off the inquiry and not take responsibility for what was happening.

What was the solution to the problem? Interestingly, it seemed that 'naming' the issue and the discussion around it was enough to alter behaviour. Within five minutes, the patterns of conversation started to change. David asked Sally a question, Sarah intervened without being asked, Sally interrupted Sarah and the cycle repeated. At some point the three participants began talking across each other. By the end of the session the patterns had changed completely and the discussion had become a real enquiry. Participants in the FMCG group also commented that they missed the visual clues they usually used to help them understand when to interject in a conversation. They were encouraged to put aside teleconferencing 'etiquette' in order to free up conversation. For example, they were encouraged to interrupt each other, resulting in a multi-textured conversation that yielded more openness.

"We didn't wait for each of us to end a sentence. We even kept on talking on top of each other," said Minna, from the telecoms group. "It was more comfortable and it made an impact". Petri, another participant, explained that he didn't expect such closeness in the session: "It felt so close and the discussion was so open. Even if the [physical] distance is there, the distance didn't mean anything in terms of the relationship between us".

The power of the virtual nod

Without the visual clues used in face-to-face meetings, powerful questions that drive the discussion forward in some real world meetings can become negative when used in an audio only world. Barbara, a member of the FMCG team reflected after a particularly intense audio action learning session that she had felt "grilled and quite alone". Barbara's colleagues, Claire and Debbie, meanwhile expressed their frustration at feeling unable to reassure Barbara.

Analysis of the nature and the quality of the discourse after the call suggested that questions had been enabling questions rather than difficult or blocking questions. Nothing was wrong with the nature of the questions, the problem was the audio-only environment.

Just as visual stimulus is used in face-to-face meetings to couch the terms of a powerful question, the same is needed in an audio environment. More feedback is required with reassuring and supporting interventions running alongside questioning. In that way the questions become less sharp when combined with reassuring statements such as "I understand", "it makes sense", "OK, I see". Virtual nodding, in the verbal form of "I see" and "ahhhhh" or "mmmmm" become critical in creating a dynamic conversation, where all members feel heard and understood.

Does silence speak louder than words?

In developing intimacy, the physical constraints of audio communication can be played to advantage. The senses, stripped of visual stimulus, have to slow down and focus solely on the voice. The natural focus on words and voice amplifies listening skills and allows the listener to go deeper and think seriously about the issue at hand, resulting in thoughtful silence. Programmed, as most of us are in the Western world, to cover up what might be considered embarrassing moments with idle chit-chat in an audio environment, where everything is amplified by ten, imagine the impact on new teams, unused to such yawning silences!

Different team members are likely to interpret silence in different ways. In the FMCG group,

Debbie described the silences in the conversation as something painful, "a hole", adding that on reflection she found the session so difficult that "I escaped from it by opening my computer screen."

From Barbara's point of view, "I felt that I had been exposing myself a lot, I didn't get any feedback and I got very concerned about the complete silence. Am I interesting anybody? Am I making myself ridiculous?" Barbara explained that because she didn't have anybody in front of her to reflect what she had said through body language, eye contact or even a simple nod, she "reflected it back" on herself.

Learning to work with the silence is a powerful skill for leaders seeking to develop intimacy and reflection in virtual team work. Rather than leaping into the content of a discussion and asking what a team member is thinking now, leaders need to be trained to ask what the silence is about and how the silence feels. Much can be learnt about the relationship of the team by being curious about the nature of the silence rather than the content of the conversation.

By letting silence exist, team members are given the space to reflect rather than just saying what pops into their head first. The brain tends to listen harder and hear more because of the lack of visual clues, the connecting environment is more minimalist, making sense happen slower but deeper. Better solutions are the result.

A new model of working

By building trust and intimacy into audio meetings, teams can do exactly the same kind of work or even more than their colleagues working in a face-to-face environment. More openness can be achieved quickly and to a deeper level and the fact that there are no physical constraints can make this a very powerful environment for work. Furthermore, people who learn to work differently in an audio environment develop new leadership skills – such as working more with their intuition, or drastically improve current skills – such as listening, which they can in turn use in a face-to-face environment. They become more versatile and effective leaders. In creating groundbreaking teams, with the help of effective audio team working, geographic distance need not be a distractor but an enabler.

Ghislaine Caulat is a Business Director of Ashridge Consulting and specialises in the field of Virtual Leadership and Virtual Work. She has run numerous Audio Action Learning sessions with several global companies for over one year and has designed, together with other colleagues at Ashridge Consulting, a development concept about Virtual Leadership.