**Partnering for Success: Internal Communications Strategies for Working Across Organizational Silos**

# Highlights from the RETAIN TA Community of Practice Dialogue – September 23, 2019

# Overview

On September 23, 2019, the RETAIN Technical Assistance (TA) team hosted a live Community of Practice (CoP) in its “Communications Exchange” series, which is designed tohelp RETAIN awardees maximize the potential of their state demonstration projects through effective communication.

The session was titled **“Partnering for Success: Internal Communications Strategies for Working Across Organizational Silos.”** The session’s presenters were Mona Kilany of the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Greta Menard of Concepts, Inc. Hope Adler of Concepts, Inc. served as moderator.

This document captures key content from the presentation as well as highlights from the information-sharing dialogue.

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# Why Team Communication Matters

The presenters framed the discussion by exploring the importance of effective team communication. Key points included the following:

* **Good communication is the “oil” that can make a RETAIN team run smoothly.**
* **Research shows a link between team communication and performance.** A recent [meta-analysis of 150 studies and more than 9,000 teams](https://scienceforwork.com/blog/team-communication/) investigated the link between team communication and performance. The main findings confirm that communication may be related to the results the team achieves—although the relationship between team communication and performance may depend on many different factors, such as how much face-to-face time the team has, how familiar they are with each other, or the way that team members communicate with each other.
* **Effective communication can lay the groundwork for stronger team functioning**.
* **Communication can create an environment of mutual respect and open discussions,** which are needed to work toward shared knowledge and programmatic goals.
* **A high-performing team can be cultivated by creating clear communication standards, putting standards into practice, and holding others accountable for upholding practices.**

# How to Build a Communicative Culture

The presenters acknowledged that RETAIN teams are in a unique situation because they have to communicate and work together not just across a single organization, but *several* organizations. They shared some basic tips for building a communicative culture in such a situation:

* **Remember quality vs. quantity.** While research indicates that team communication goes hand-in-hand with better performance, it also shows that the link between communication and performance seems to be stronger when you focus on the *quality*, rather than the quantity of communication. It’s about how *well* you communicate, not how often.
* **Implement team processes and procedures, and manage expectations around communication**. Consider performing a process mapping exercise that leads to an outline of organizational charts, team procedures, standing meeting schedules, and attendance expectations. In addition, document communications practices and guidelines that suit your team. This should cover things like the channels your team members are supposed to use for certain kinds of communication based on urgency or type of request, how quickly team leaders expect a response, etc.
* **Facilitate virtual and face-to-face exchanges.** Face-to-face meetings are not always possible—especially for RETAIN teams whose partners are located in different cities altogether. However, when you have a chance to get together live and in-person, even if it’s only occasionally, it makes a difference in helping you align team goals and build cohesiveness.
* **Foster reciprocal feedback mechanisms.** Leaders need to be able to *provide* feedback on how the project is going, as well as *receive* feedback. So, instituting reciprocal feedback mechanisms is an important step to preventing communications breakdowns that hinder success. Take steps to ensure there are processes in place for team members at any level to give and receive constructive feedback.
* **Identify and address communications breakdowns.** Communications breakdowns can be traced to a number of factors. If you commit to identifying these breakdowns early and nipping them in the bud before they negatively impact the project, you can address them and move forward successfully.
* **Consider scalability.** If you’re doing things haphazardly and “catch as catch can,” once your project grows and scales, you could find yourself with a broken, inefficient process. If you make your processes systematic from the start, you’ll be better poised for project growth and scalability.
* **Make it fun and engaging.** Look for ways to jazz up traditional meetings. Ideas include:
  + Sharing a “mission moment” at the beginning of each meeting—an anecdote from the project to help connect what you’re talking about to the larger goal.
  + Take turns leading meetings so that you get a variety of voices and leadership styles in the mix. Or, when logistically possible, have a different partner host each in-person meeting round robin style so that you achieve a mix of settings.
  + Introduce ice breakers and team-building exercises (e.g., one RETAIN team recently got together for an Escape Room outing).

# Staying Connected

Presenters reviewed several traditional and technology-based tools for staying connected, with the caveat that RETAIN TA is not recommending or endorsing any specific products. All were discussed in general terms. Tools for staying connected include:

* Standing team meetings.
* Topic-based workgroups.
* Advisory groups.
* Digital tools:
  + Online workspaces (e.g., SharePoint, Moodle).
  + Project management software (e.g., Asana, Basecamp, Microsoft Project)
  + Cloud-based file sharing (e.g., Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive)
  + Team listservs (e.g., Google Groups, Yahoo Groups)
  + Live chat software (e.g., Skype for Business).
  + And more…

Note: Not all digital collaboration tools are Section 508 compliant. Be sure to keep accessibility in mind when choosing products.

# Discussion Highlights

During the interactive CoP discussion, participants explored how their own RETAIN teams communicate and collaborate, key challenges, and successful strategies for working across organizational silos. Highlights from the discussion include the following:

**Team Communication Challenges:**

* Cross agency technology issues (e.g., security concerns, firewalls) that prevent all partners from accessing team files.
* The use of too many systems.
* Complex workflows.
* Lack of Internet access in rural areas.

**Strategies for Success:**

* Organizational charts, standard operating procedures, and process maps are proving useful—both for team flow and customer workflows.
* Hiring people with multiple, cross-disciplinary skill sets can help teams run smoothly.
* Several teams host leadership meetings once a week, as well as workgroup meetings as needed.
* Don’t host meetings for meeting’s sake; also, remember that not everyone has to attend every call or meeting.
* Ensure that points of contact are clear across your project so that inquiries can be directed to the right person right away.
* With permission, consider recording and sharing meeting recordings so that those who miss meetings and conference calls can catch up.

**Digital Tools Used by RETAIN Teams:**

* Shared Google Calendar platforms.
* Online workspaces to support team data sharing (e.g., SharePoint).
* Screen-sharing software to support use of visual aids during conference calls (e.g., Zoom, Go To Meeting).

# Additional Reading Recommended During the CoP

* **Managing Organizational Communication Toolkit.**   
  Society for Human Resource Management. <https://bit.ly/2G7eSYf>
* **Organizational Communication Research Center.** Institute for Public Relations. <https://bit.ly/2kJnQ7P>
* **"Effective Team Communication? Focus on Quality!"** Science for Work. <https://bit.ly/2rL5TGd>

To explore these topics further, or to receive one-on-one assistance with communications-related RETAIN tasks, please contact your RETAIN TA liaison or email [RETAINTA@air.org](mailto:RETAINTA@air.org).