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Two types of channelling

UGM research identified two types of channelling, each applicable to a particular set of circumstances.

Team-channelled

Some quieter members are willing to address the team when invited. Although they won't usually offer their opinions spontaneously, they don't mind sharing their views when asked specifically.

For this type of member, it is helpful to give them a 'heads up'. For example, "After John, we'd like to hear from Jane". This allows Jane to gather her thoughts and prepare to address the group. It also avoids the additional stress that arises from being asked to comment without warning.

Individual-channelled

Other members may never feel comfortable addressing the team themselves, even though they are happy to be a part of the team. They're usually rock-solid contributors, who just get on and always do their jobs to the best of their ability.

They are willing to channel their ideas and perspectives through other team members, usually choosing to do so through the same one or two members each time. The 'channeller' listens to this member and then relays their message to the larger group.

LEVERAGE A 20% PERFORMANCE BOOST WITH CHANNELLING

The regular team meeting

Mike had barely finished speaking when Tom leaned forward and addressed the assembled team. Once he had finished, he turned to Mary who had started to give her opinion. Mike then jumped in, as team manager, summing up deliberations as he brought the conversation to a close.

Had you been a fly on the wall at this team meeting, you would have noticed that Kevin had said very little during the hour. In fact, Kevin seldom addresses the team spontaneously at any of the regular team meetings, although he is always attentive to what his colleagues share.

Whenever the team looks to Kevin for an opinion, he usually offers incredibly well-considered commentary in response. The team highly values these contributions. Only occasionally does Kevin share his thoughts without prompting, usually when he feels the team is heading in the wrong direction. Quite often the team is influenced to take an alternate path as a result of his intervention.

Not everyone chooses to be extroverted

This vignette plays out in many thousands of teams around Australia on a daily basis. UGM research suggests that most teams are likely to have their Kevins. If comment were passed about team leadership in those teams, the Kevins of the world would hardly garner a mention. After all, our common definition of leading includes being out in front and taking charge of everything. Some are likely even to pejoratively label Kevin, "a follower". Usually, those would be the loudest in the group, who see little difference between extroversion and leadership, regardless of quality of influence.

Team communications bandwidth is limited

Other related research shows that the larger the size of team, the larger the chance of having an even greater number of members who don't actually speak very often. A key reason for this is because, no matter the size of team, there is a pretty constant team communications bandwidth available. More could be gained only by devoting increased time to the communications process. This is often not an option, since that extra bandwidth comes at the expense of other team processes and usually negatively affects productivity.

In order to maximise coordination, a few individuals are likely to commandeer the communications bandwidth, leaving little over for others. For example, in a regular group of around 7 people, we could expect 2 or 3 people to speak much more often than the rest of the team. This is a key reason why larger teams are advised to break into sub-groupings for a least some of the time.

Missed opportunities

In our example team, the team occasionally does turn to Kevin for his opinion, even if not nearly often enough. However, our research shows that many teams simply never get to hear from their quieter members. Some feel that if the quieter people don't speak up, it's only those individuals who will lose out.

But this just isn't the case! We've found that oftentimes the quieter team members are incredibly reflective of team deliberations. Instead of thinking about their next speaking turn, they're focusing on the substance of the team contributions. If asked, they're usually able to offer pertinent input about the quality of the team's discussions to that point. Missing these inputs is like missing gold dust, simply because it's not packaged like a nugget. Quite possibly, some of these ideas might be exactly what the team needs to achieve a breakthrough.

Why do they do choose to remain quiet?

It will surprise many extroverts (read often the usual leaders) that some team members have no desire at all to continually be in the limelight. They generate just as much self-esteem from making a solid, but quiet, contribution to the team. Why should they spend energy on competing for leadership when someone else is doing a good enough job? However, when they feel they do have something to contribute, because no-one else has stepped up, then they take a lead. Not surprisingly, at that time, their input is usually very influential and has a profound impact on team outcomes.

This does raise the question about how we view leadership. The common view is that the leader is the individual who exercises influence most often. Yet what about the team member who seldom exercises influence but, when they do, it markedly alters subsequent outcomes? Since leading is defined as 'influencing others towards a common goal', both scenarios are examples of leadership. Each is valuable in its own way.

Getting more from the quieter members

If a team with 5 members has only one person who is fairly quiet, there is a risk that the team might not maximise performance. However, if the rest of the members used the channelling influencing behaviour, they could ensure all members were fully engaged in a way they felt comfortable.

Channelling is one of the eight team influencing behaviours (see our prior briefing, 'How followers exercise leadership', for the full list). Channelling involves using targeted communicating and listening to get quieter members to contribute. If one in five members is able to contribute more, the team stands to leverage up to 20% additional input.