

Communications Management Challenges in Creative Industries: The Creative Worker's Perspective

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[Cultura Visual / Visual Culture]



Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify and explore how workplace communications management affects overall organization performance and its ability to perform creativity and innovation. A literature review was conducted in order to identify key managerial challenges in creative industries. Although the friction between control and creativity is known to exist in the creative industries, there is very little research on topic how to better manage the creative workforce. Authors gathered empirical data from creative workers employed by video game studio. Drawing from empirical evidence, it was found that, although creative workers believe that good communication skills are crucial to the success of a creative project there is an obvious division between the more and less experienced creative workers. In addition, the study provided insight into how conflict affects employee's creativity.

Keywords

Creative Workers,
Communications
Management, Conflict.

1. Introduction

In the past decade there has been conducted considerable studies which reveals that conflicts in the work environment have a particularly negative impact on the innovative activity and, consequently, on creativity [1], [2], [3], [4]. And conflict in creative work environment is perceived as inevitable [5]. And, although, notion of conflict-free work environment is not feasible or even desired, perception, that conflicts are a natural and insoluble part of creative process is false. Furthermore, this perception is damaging to the creative organization.

As Pixar director and cofounder Ed Catmull stated manager's job is not to prevent problems or risks, but to create conditions where those problems can be effectively solved [6]. Therefore, only when there is competent management creative organization can truly hope to use all its various resources effectively and create environment where innovation and creativity can flourish. However, today there is a knowledge gap in the context of communications management in creative organization. And, although, there is incredible amount of data that provides evidence how miscommunication causes loss of various organization resources, there is considerable lack of research done in this area.

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This paper attempts to examine how creative and management (control) groups inside creative organization perceive different aspects of work related communication and its impact towards overall organizational performance. To achieve these goals authors of this paper cooperated with one Lithuanian video game studio where interviews were conducted.

This paper is structured as follows: authors firstly will analyze literature that identifies unique management challenges in the context of creative industries. Especially those, that involves various communication aspects. Secondly, empirical research methodology and the collected data through interviews will be presented. Authors will conclude with a discussion about communications management's impact to overall organizational culture, conflicts management and work efficiency.

2. Literature Review

The communication process plays a very important role in the creative industries. The creative economy is about knowledge, experimentation (innovation) and communication [7], [8]. Therefore, in order to further investigate the lack of communication and the distinctive nature of conflicts based on their inefficiencies, which are specific to the creative industries, it is necessary to take a closer look at the communication process itself. Although, communication is the process by which information is conveyed, the most important aspect in evaluating the communication process is "communication effectiveness".

Whyte [9] has said that "The biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." In other words, it is often (albeit falsely) believed that the communication process was successful if the message reached its destination uncorrupted without confirmation that the message would affect the recipient exactly as the sender intended. Thus, even if the message reaches the target audience uncorrupted, but fails to influence the purpose as the source of the communication sought, the communication process cannot be considered successful.

The communication process is an integral and indispensable element for the realization of a creative project. However, this does not mean that communication process was successful, even if the creative project was able to successfully achieve all of its creative and/or commercial goals. The realization of a creative project (fulfilment of all creative goals) can be successful despite ineffective communication during the implementation of the project. In the latter case, communication inefficiency always means the loss of various resources to resolve problems caused by ineffective communication.

The fact that miscommunication cannot be completely avoided does not mean that the management has a prerequisite to impose responsibility for miscommunication (and its consequences) on the recipient of the message. On the contrary, creative organizations, in which the management assumes responsibility for the effects of miscommunication, gain the loyalty of their employees [6]. For this reason, it can be argued that in context of creative industries management should always simply write off the losses occurred because of miscommunication rather than seek the person or group to take the blame.

Thus, it is essential that organization's management would have adequate communications management skills and knowledge. Furthermore, managers have to tailor communication skills to the specific conditions within the context of the creative industries. In other words, creative workers not only act beyond "decorum, norms, or common perception" [10] but also have a special bargaining power, because there are (a) most important organization's resource and (b) resource that is relatively hard to replace.

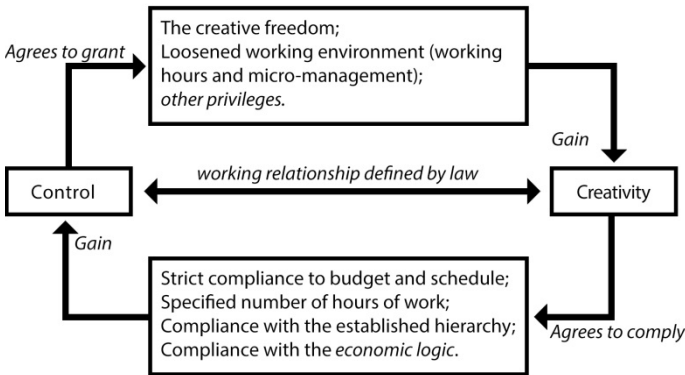


Fig. 1. Relationship construct between control and creativity in a creative organization.

Therefore, management cannot use common management methods that proved to be effective in other industries. Furthermore, laboratory-based studies have shown that traditional management strategies that promote employee's efficiency have the opposite effect and reduce creativity [11]. Thus, managers in creative industries are often told to give employees limited autonomy [12]. However, the concept of creative industries indicates that profit is a priority and (artistic) prestige is secondary goal. Thus, budget, schedule and the client's demands have to be followed unconditionally. This confrontation between the "creative" and the "industrial" dimensions has been repeatedly explored [13], [14] and is one of the biggest management challenges for creative organization. It can be argued that the harmony of the creative and managerial groups is achieved by the mutual consent of both parties to surrender some of their freedoms and preferences in exchange for the privileges and obligations that are important to the organization's community. This orientation towards the harmony of perceptions and interests (between control and creativity) can be described as a mutual guarantee of certain rights and privileges which allows the creative enterprise to achieve its goals (Fig. 1).

Therefore, for some time there is appreciation for managers who are able to find the equilibrium between the ability to generate creativity and have control over project implementation [15], [16]. Unfortunately, the balance between creativity and control cannot be achieved through a universal approach - each company has unique elements of work culture that influences how successful are managerial approaches. Thus, one company's method of stimulating creativity may destroy it in another company [17].

Given that the commercial success of any creative company depends on the motivation and efficiency of its creative employees, the management is forced to find a strategic management model that minimizes the opposition between control and creativity. Otherwise, destructive conflict within the organization is inevitable. And one of the greatest creativity-reducing factors in the creative process is conflict [1], [2].

3. Empirical Study

The data used for this study was collected by qualitative research using a semi-structured interview method (using face-to-face interview type). This method is quite popular in social studies [18], [19] because it allows not only to determine respondents' attitudes towards certain phenomena but also to identify what specific factors and variables may influence the respondents' action [19].

One Lithuanian video game company, established in 2008, was chosen as the subject of the research. This video game developer has branches in three countries (with headquarters in Lithuania), and is one of the largest and most successful video game studios in the state, having released several globally successful video games (several studio's games have more than five million players). It must be noted, however, that even the most successful Lithuanian video games studios cannot compare in size or scope to most successful global studios.

A qualitative study was conducted in August 2019 at the studio's campus in Kaunas, Lithuania. This branch employs about 30 people. However, some of the employees were on leave or had crunch time during the interview days, so just over twenty people participated in the study. The interviews were conducted in a closed meeting room which could guarantee the anonymity of the respondents' answers. Twenty-one staff members were interviewed during the two meetings.

The study consisted of 27 questions consisting of two parts - eight with multiple choice questions and 18 with open-ended questions. An additional section at the end of the interview was left for further comment. However, at the beginning of the study, it was identified that in this particular studio there were only a couple of staff members that had experience of working with clients. For this reason, the questioner was altered (one question about communication experience when working with clients was omitted) and respondents were given only eight multiple-choice questions and 16 open-ended questions during the interviews.

The multiple choice questions part of the interview included questions such as "Which age group do you belong to?", "What is your position in the organization?" and "What is your seniority?". Not only does the nature of these questions help to establish correlations, but it also helps respondents to warm up before answering open-ended questions [20]. Open-ended questions sought to determine respondents' attitudes to the importance of communication processes in their profession and to determine how they evaluate the effectiveness of communications management within an organization. As well as to identify causes, developments, and consequences of conflicts (particularly those resulting from ineffec-

tive communication). It should be noted that the advantages of the open-ended question method, which allow capturing the logic, thinking process and principles of the respondents [20], are crucial in order to successfully grasp how best to manage human capital in a creative organization.

4. Findings

21 employees participated in the survey, 12 of whom were male (57%). Among all respondents, the age group distribution was as follows: 10% of respondents were under or 20 years old, 52% belong to the age group of 21-25 years old, 33% belong to the age group of 26-35 years old, 5% belong to the age group 36-45 years old. Among the respondents were no persons that were 46 years old or older. When asked to indicate which of the two elective groups of professionals (i.e. creatives or managers) the respondents belong to, only one respondent stated that they had only managerial responsibilities within the organization and did not carry out any creative activity.

When asked to indicate overall seniority, respondents distributed as follows: 14% of respondents has worked in the studio for up to six months, 24% said they had professional experience that falls into section of between 6 months and 2 years, 38% said they had from 2 years to 5 years. And 24% of respondents have more than 5 years of experience.

When respondents were asked how long they worked at the studio, the answers were distributed as follows: 33% of employees work for up to six months, 38% of respondents work for 6 months to 2 years, 10% of employees worked in the studio for 2 to 5 years, and 19% of those surveyed reported working in the organization for more than 5 years.

When respondents were asked to indicate their position in the organizational structure according to the choices they made - managerial (top), middle or executive (lowest) - respondents' answers revealed that 42% of employees surveyed occupy an executive position, 48% a middle position and 10% a managerial position.

76% of the respondents had or will shortly have diploma in a creative specialty. 19% of the respondents had education in arts management (or similar), and 14% had no education in either the creative or management specialty. It is interesting to note that the only employee with administrative responsibilities among the respondents does not have an education in arts (or any other kind) management.

Next question respondents were asked was about whether they were introduced to management and communication theory during their study years. If the respondents answered in the affirmative, they were additionally asked two questions - how thoroughly were they introduced to the theories and whether they felt that they had significantly increased their professional value as they entered the labor market. Also, those respondents who answered the first open-ended question negatively were asked if they believe that management and communication theory knowledge would have significantly increased their professional value. 19% of the respondents could not answer this question because at the time of the interview they did not yet finished any higher education. 33% of respondents indicated that they had studied subjects during the study years that

introduced the elements of creative project management. It is interesting to note that all respondents agreed that this knowledge either significantly increased their professional value immediately after graduation (1/3 of the answers), or is likely to do so in the future. 24% of respondents stated that only the basics were introduced during the studies. Among these respondents, only one employee of the company indicated that additional management knowledge would not be desirable during the study if it was provided at the expense of specialty (programming). All other respondents unequivocally stated that this type of knowledge and skills would be very useful in increasing their professional value and significantly assisting them early in their careers.

It should be noted that one of the respondents expressed the view that although management and communication knowledge and skills are very important in the current position, in retrospect, such skills were not seen as important in early career. 24% of all respondents stated that they had not been introduced to management and communication theories during their study years. Among these respondents, only one person indicated that adding these disciplines to the study program would not significantly increase the value of the respondent in the labor market. The remaining respondents indicated that familiarization with the theory would have significantly increased their professional value. It is interesting to note that respondents with relatively little professional experience, who in most cases occupy an executive position in the organization, responded dismissively to the notion that communication and management theories would have positive effect to their professional value. However, the importance of communication and management skills is highlighted by respondents with greater professional experience and with higher positions in organization's hierarchy.

The correlation between the importance of communication skills and the leadership position is confirmed by the respondents' answers to the next question about how they value the importance of communication skills in their specialty and career. 86% of respondents said that communication skills are "very important" or "important". Most respondents additionally stated that without the knowledge and skills of how to effectively present a creative vision, formulate tasks and evaluate creative work, it is impossible to occupy a leading position and/or advance in the career. Several respondents also noted that all problems in the implementation of a creative project stem from ineffective communication. 14% of respondents said that communication skills are of medium importance for their careers. All respondents who expressed the latter view occupy an executive position within the organization.

81% of respondents stated that they value their personal communication skills as adequate. In other words, additional investment in personal communication skills (such as public speaking, interpersonal and business communication, intercultural communication, project documentation and preparation, etc.) would not significantly increase their professional value. The remaining 19% indicated that additional investment in personal communication skills would significantly increase

their professional value and advance their careers. Interestingly, half of the respondents who value their personal communication skills poorly represent executive positions within the organization. The rest of the respondents represent a middle position in the organizational structure. The overwhelming majority of respondents report that personal communication skills are most needed to effectively lead a larger team.

Next question for the respondents was about their organization cultural values. In other words, how, in their opinion, they would describe organization's culture. 1/3 of all respondents used the word "freedom" or variations of this word to describe organizational values. Employees of the organization believe that their workplace can be characterized as "open", which not only allows, but also encourages, open communication between employees and all levels of management. Another common explanation provided by respondents to explain their choice for using the word "freedom" was celebrate employees' relative freedom to make creative decisions in the implementation of the creative tasks delegated to them. Several respondents also added that the concept of "freedom" implies that management does not engage in micro-management. It should be noted that employees in higher organizational positions and employees that works in the company for a longer period of time additionally named a few more organizational values (such as never aggressively exploiting their target audience (children) for financial purposes). However, for the workers that falls into executive category the freedom aspects is most important in their work. It should be noted that one respondent stated in additional comments that the existing organization's culture were not a coincidence but a result of hard work and consistent work.

When asked about respondents' attitudes towards the management processes in the organization projects 62% of respondents indicated that creative projects are implemented smoothly or with minor deficiencies. 24% of the respondents indicated that there are significant shortcomings in the implementation of creative projects and 14% of the respondents indicated that the projects are not implemented effectively. It is very interesting to note that the vast majority of complaints (88% of the respondents that are partially or totally dissatisfied with the management processes) belong to the middle or management level. In other words, the most dissatisfied with existing management processes are those in management positions. Among the most frequent complaints are the following:

- It is desired that there would be a greater involvement of the management from the very beginning of the project. This would allow faster decision-making process in case of unexpected change of circumstances.
- Ineffective meetings. In the respondents' opinion, very often individual participants in a meeting interpret taken decisions differently.
- There are persistent communication challenges within the organization in communicating project-related information (misinterpretation of instructions, not clear responsibilities, poorly documented instructions, etc.).

Few respondents complained that projects were often delayed and work was often paused while management decisions were pending. One respondent commented that the situation could be significantly improved if the organization had an internal rule for making decisions within 48 hours period. It is interesting to note that a number of these complaints were also mentioned by respondents who said that they considered project management to be generally smooth. However, significant number of respondents added that project management is now much more efficient in the organization due to relatively recent procedural changes.

Next question respondents asked to state in what frequency miscommunication occurs in the organization. As much as 90% of the respondents stated that communication management is efficient and therefore losses due to miscommunication are rare and insignificant. Again, however, several respondents noted that the current situation is significantly better than the one that was couple month ago. 10% of respondents, when evaluating the communications management situation in the organization, stated that miscommunication occurs quite often. Another respondent pointed out that the lack of a clear hierarchy within an organization is often the reason why information does not travel efficiently.

Follow up question sought to find out how respondents react when confronted. Respondents' responses to this question showed that individuals' reactions are very particular. One range of reactions includes individuals who are very sensitive to any conflict, causing them great emotional distress, and another who is aggressive in defending their position and motivated to proving the correctness of their position. However, the most recurring element among all respondents is the quest to resolve the conflict as quickly as possible – the continuity of the conflict itself is a source of significant discomfort.

Next question asked how does conflict affect respondents' ability to work (create). 95% of respondents said that conflicts affect them negatively. Respondents indicated that conflicts distract them, reduce productivity, and they have difficulty to concentrating. 43% of respondents stated that their working capacity is fully restored only the next day. The rest of respondents believed, that working capacity could be fully restored on the same working day, depending on the intensity of the conflict. One respondent stated that his working capacity could be restored in about 15 minutes after conflict. However, few other respondents revealed that conflicts would affect them negatively even if they are not directly involved into the conflict. Almost all respondents stated that they feel the need to resolve the conflict as soon as possible. Finally, only one person stated that conflict affects him positively. In other words, when a conflict arises, a person's work capacity increases.

100% of respondents said that conflicts in the work environment were "rare" or "very rare". Individual respondents reported that all conflicts in the work environment were due to ineffective communication and were usually resolved very quickly. Responses also noted that conflicts are more likely to arise between professionals from different disciplines, including when employees comment on job performance without adequate knowledge and skills.

The final question for respondents sought to gather insights about what management's actions would make them think about changing workplace. 40% of respondents stated that "Public downgrading of professional skills" or "repeated negative assessment of professional skills" would be the key motivation to look for another job. 55% of respondents stated that disrespect, as well as any kind of toxic behavior, would motivate to terminate working relationship. One respondent stated that he would be encouraged to look for another job if management would not be interested in or react to workplace processes.

5. Discussions

Conducted study revealed that respondents believe that good communication skills are crucial to the success of a creative project. Moreover, the majority of employees in the organization agreed with the notion that courses in management and communication theories would greatly enhance their professional value. In fact, it is very interesting to note that the importance of these skills is becoming evident among the employees who hold mid-level position. Of course, the importance of communicative and managerial skills in career advancement is noted even by Henri Fayol more than a century ago. Thus, there is no necessity to defend the honour or value of management and communication study fields in the context of business environment.

However, as the authors' research shows, management theory and skills development required to effectively manage a creative project at the moment are basic or not at all included in the curriculum of Lithuanian higher education institutions that have bachelor or masters programs for creative professionals, especially in animation programs [22], [23], [24]. Thus, today higher education institutions in Lithuania do not perceive communication management skills as necessary for future creative worker. Furthermore, this, at least partly, may explain why less experienced creative workers soft skills (communication and management skills) rate significantly poorer than hard skills (animating, programming, illustrating and etc.). Thus, although, curriculum of art education is not primary focus of this study it is evident that most effective way to implement positive changes in creative industries is through education, especially when national video game industry is still showing rapid growth.

This study revealed that communications management, in respondents' opinion, plays a very important role in the successful implementation of a creative project. Furthermore, is also confirmed by the respondents' comments that all the recent loss of various resources in the organization was due to ineffective communication. However, understanding the importance of communications management does not guarantee its proper implementation [25]. The fact that even a few respondents highlighted that the current management situation in the organization is significantly better than it was relatively recently indicates that the organization is developing its communications management strategy not on the basis of known management practices, theory and research, but on a trial and error basis method.

Another very interesting aspect when evaluating the effectiveness of an organization's communications management is the conflicting responses of respondents when assessing creative project management. Positive and negative evaluations on this issue are more or less halved, there is no correlation between respondents' attitudes and their position in the organization, seniority and other factors recorded during the interviews suggesting that project management is largely dependent on the personal leadership skills and competences and not triggered by an overall communications management strategy. According to the data provided by the respondents, communication among the group members belonging to different specialties is significantly more challenging.

Respondents have very different views on the effectiveness of communications management, but communicative conflicts are very scarce and easily resolved. This suggests that there is another factor that allows achieving and maintaining a non-conflicting work environment. We argue that in this case, this is achieved through harmony between control, creative values and appropriate social relationships. And while respondents noted that project implementation still faces challenges due to vaguely formulated goals, it is clear that this is not a systematic and ongoing phenomenon within the studio.

The vast majority of respondents not only appreciate the organization's relative freedom to make some creative decisions, but the loss of these freedoms has also been identified as a prerequisite for starting to consider changing workplace. This data confirm the importance of the control-creative dichotomy presented in the paper.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the impact of conflict on creative workers. The fact that respondents react to conflict in a very different way demonstrates once again that there can be no universal way to manage conflict in the work environment. This means that it is the responsibility of the management to treat each conflict as unique and to find solutions that will help all parties to reduce emotional discomfort as quickly as possible. Thus, management need to respond appropriately and quickly to resolve the conflict.

It is important to remember that the pool sample for this study is relatively small, thus all gathered data and conclusions that are drawn from this data should be regarded as footing and indication for further studies, rather than conclusive proof of existing phenomena. Furthermore, the study on communications management in creative organization should be extended not only in other creative industries' segments but in other countries as well.

However, the empirical study has gathered very interesting data on how conflict affects creative workers. The fact that conflict reduces working capacity it is not new [26], [27], but the author's study revealed that most creative workers can only restore their full working capacity only the next day. It should be noted that, unlike non-creative work, where conflict would mean that work will simply be slower, in the context of creative work, it may also mean that the entire creator's work while exposed to distress from the conflict may not be subsequently used in the final project.

The discomfort caused by the conflict state is also likely to be the reason why a large proportion of respondents indicated that they would seek to resolve the conflict as soon as possible.

Conclusions

It is important to state that this paper do not try to prove that communication or management skills are important in creative industries. The importance of these academic disciplines for thriving business should be self-evident by now. However, there is still considerable lack of understanding how to manage creative enterprise (mainly - creative workers) effectively and what are key challenges that significantly affect creative ability and motivation, especially from creative workers' perspective. Even the best illustrator or animator will perform inadequately under poor management. Thus, there is a demand for this type of research and, in extended, for a debate about skills and knowledge that creative workers must have today in order to successfully enter and thrive in the creative labour market.

Data gathered by authors provide insight on how creative workers perceive different aspects of communications management. Evidences suggest that poorly executed communications management will result in the loss of various resources for the organization. Furthermore, miscommunication in the context of creative industries very easily can cause communication-based conflicts. And the latter clearly affects the creative workers' creativity and damages organization's competitiveness.

This study has provided important insights to how conflicts affect creative workers' productivity and how their deal with distressful situation. Furthermore, data prove that management ability to identify and resolve conflicts is essential in creative organization. Thus, adequate communication skills are fundamental not only for management but also for any creative worker who has ambition to move forwards in organizational hierarchy.

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