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Communication challenges facing management teams

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore what kinds of communication challenges management teams (MTs) experience and to suggest ideas for developing competent communication practices.
Design/methodology/approach – Working according to the principles of qualitative research, a total of seven MT members from seven different international companies were interviewed. The thematic in-depth interviews were analyzed by first looking at all references of communication challenges, and then grouping them into six different dimensions.
Findings – Most of the communication challenges facing MTs are related to the teams' meetings, where issues of leadership, decision making and participation may well be intensified. The meetings were experienced as formal communication forums, where MT members do not always express their true opinions either because other team members prevent it or because they are unable to do so. Informal communication plays a pivotal role in facilitating trust and competent communication practices.
Practical implications – MTs need to be mindful of how they communicate and develop a reflective practice in order to develop competent communication practices.
Originality/Value – The study illustrates the essential themes that the MT members experience and perceive as central in MT communication and teamwork. Studying MTs from a communication perspective adds a valuable contribution to MT research.
Keywords: Communication, Communication challenges, Competent communication practices, Management teams, Qualitative research
Paper type: Research paper

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FACING MANAGEMENT TEAMS

1. Introduction

Recent perspectives in studies of management teams (MTs) put communication and interaction in the foreground. This focus originates from the so-called *relational turn* in social sciences, which changes the focus from individuals and their characteristics to people-in-conversations (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012). However, the most common interest of MT research has been in the composition of MTs and demographic factors such as team members' age, gender, tenure, and their connection to team performance, organizational success and corporate turnaround (Abebe, 2010; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Zorn and Thompson, 2002). In spite of the important contributions made by composition research to MT research, the findings remain contradictory. A group of talented managers does not necessarily form an effective MT, but MTs exist and are shaped in communication. Lessem and Baruch (2000, p. 75) state that while it is relatively easy to focus on basic team characteristics "the way people come together as a combination, has rarely been explored".

There is a general agreement that MTs play a pivotal role in organizations (Lessem and Baruch, 2000). In most organizations no other group has such a vast impact on organizational outcomes as the MT (Hambrick, 2010). MTs have been linked to, for example, organizational performance, strategic processes, leadership, knowledge management and organizational change (Fuchs, 2011; Kakabadse *et al*., 1995; Lakshman, 2009; Wang and Chan, 1995). It is not surprising that it is of such huge interest to both researchers and practitioners to understand how to build effective MTs.

Furthermore, it has long been known that communication affects outcomes that are important for top teams (DeWine, 2000). Although strategic management scholars have been interested in decision-making and problem-solving processes within MTs, communication has been treated as a variable rather than as the fundamental process whereby such teams come into being (Gibbs *et al*., 2008). By communication we mean the ongoing process by which people construct their understanding and actions in collaboration with others. Communication is the process of creating social worlds, rather than simply the transmitting of information between people (Pearce, 2007).

Although studying MT communication has become of increasing interest to researchers, there has been relatively little research that has adopted an in-depth communication perspective on MTs. The recently-emerged perspective known as the strategy-as-practice perspective sees strategy as something that people *do* in communication with others, and foregrounds the interactions of the people involved in strategy making (Whittington, 2006). More research that adopts a qualitative perspective on MT communication is needed, in order to gain a better understanding of how MT members perceive and experience being part of the MT.

The purpose of this qualitative study is two-fold: first, we aim to build understanding of what kinds of communication challenges MT members face in their internal MT work in order to understand better how to facilitate competent communication among MT members, and second, to contribute to the research and literature of (top) MTs from a communication perspective, and therefore develop better knowledge about the innermost workings of MTs.

2. Competent MT communication

To make a distinction between teams and groups, Jones and Roelofsma (2000) say that team members are more differentiated and interdependent compared to group members. In addition, Dubrin (1998) defines team members as having complementary skills, being committed to common goals and holding themselves accountable for achieving them. The management and organization literature has adopted the term *top management team* (TMT) to refer to the small group of managers at the top of an organization. However, there are different kinds of MTs, and not all of them operate at the very top. Usually a recognizable business unit within an organization has its own MT. In this paper we have chosen to use the term MT to encompass the variety of different MTs at different levels in organizations.

Zorn and Thompson (2002, p. 255) distinguish MTs from other organizational groups by pointing out two distinctive factors. First, MTs are responsible for making strategic decisions, which are "more complex, consequential, and precursive than those made by other groups". Second, MTs usually operate in a political and power-laden environment. Nadler (1998) points out that MT members often have strong power and achievement needs and an individualistic orientation. Because of this special context of the most powerful group within an organization, it is safe to assume that MTs need to coordinate their expectations, competences and actions skillfully and perform effectively as a team.

There is a growing body of research that shows that the quality of MT communication affects the organizational atmosphere and business outcomes. For example, Virany *et al*. (1992) noticed that developing social interaction within MTs improved the MTs' ability to act in turbulent surroundings. Liang *et al* (2010, p. 450) concluded that "the more communication that occurs among top managers, the greater the organization's performance". Communication frequency reduces perceptual differences amongst MT members and is important in resolving cognitive differences (Liang and Picken, 2011). Communication is of crucial importance in knowledge creation and decision making. Bonito *et al*. (2008) found that communication processes affect group members' decisions about whether or not to participate and share their information: not sharing important information can lead to reduced quality in decision making. This is an important point, since the core work of MTs is strategic decision-making, which requires knowledge sharing. However, in a study of miscommunication in TMTs, Bang (2013) identified beliefs that prevented MT members from speaking up when experiencing miscommunication. Speaking up was perceived as a negative act that would lead to undesirable consequences for oneself, for others and for the overall atmosphere within the management team.

Group communication literature has pointed out several challenges that teams can face when trying to accomplish their tasks. For instance, distance, time and cultural differences within geographically distributed teams can be major challenges which can lead to mistrust and conflict (Janssens and Brett, 2005; Scott, 2013; Zakaria *et al*., 2004). Thompson (2009) studied what communication processes influence or hinder the ability to build collective communication competence (CCC). In her study CCC was challenged by negative humour and sarcasm, debating expertise, communicating boredom and jockeying for power, whereas spending time together, practicing trust, task talk and negotiating meaning through discussion of language differences were foundational for establishing CCC. Also, CCC was facilitated by demonstrating presence, reflexive talk, backstage communication (as informal communication) and shared humour and laughter. Studies on *team reflexivity*

highlight reflexivity as a key factor in team effectiveness; that is, the more teams reflect on their performance, the more they improve it (Schippers *et al*., 2012).

As MTs operate in a complex and demanding environment, the concept of competent communication becomes crucial. How effectively a MT operates is determined by how well the MT members communicate with one another. However, in order to develop competent communication within MTs, it is relevant to understand the communication challenges MTs work with. This led us to the research question:

RQ1. *What kinds of communication challenges related to the internal MT communication do MTs face?*

3. Research approach and method

The area of MT studies is relatively new and the knowledge about the internal communication in MTs is fragmented and scarce (Bournois and Roussillon, 2010; Lessem and Baruch, 2000). Furthermore, Liang *et al*. (2010) claim that the effects of MT communication have been missing in the literature. We here state furthermore that not only the effects but also an in-depth understanding of the MT communication itself seem to be missing. We hope that our contribution will open new directions for scholars interested in qualitative research on MTs, and particularly the communication processes within them.

For this study we chose a qualitative approach that is exploratory in nature. Keyton (2006) claims that qualitative methodologies are more effective in capturing the complexity of communication phenomena than quantitative ones. According to Silverman (2011), the quantitative approach provides information of certain pre-defined factors, whereas the qualitative approach can be used to study new and locally constituted phenomena, which can provide unique insights inaccessible through a quantitative approach. Given our research task of building understanding of communication challenges as MT members perceive and experience them, we found the qualitative approach to be appropriate.

We gathered data by means of thematic in-depth interviews with MT members. Qualitative interviews are particularly well suited for understanding experiences and for exploring people's explanations of a certain phenomenon (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011), in this case, the communication challenges. Given the exploratory nature of this study, in order to ensure the richness of the data we decided to approach MT members working in different positions in international companies that represented different industries. The MT members were selected by using the first author's professional network. The criterion for selection was that the MT member had to belong to a MT with responsibility for making business-related decisions in an international company. Some interviewees were contacted directly by the first author and some interviewees were found through several contacts within the organization. Getting access to the top level in an organization was challenging and often it was impossible to get past the first contact point. Although the interviews focused on communication issues, some potential interviewees might have been afraid of revealing secret company-related information. The contacting period was about six months, and the first interviews were held after the first four months. All those who participated in the research did so voluntarily, and the confidentiality of the interview was discussed in the beginning of each interview. A total of seven interviews were conducted. In qualitative research smaller sample sizes are often justified, especially if the research depends on hard-to-find people (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

Collecting qualitative research continues until new data no longer add much significance to the existing themes (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Much interview research relies on saturation although there are various views about when the data reach saturation point (Guest *et al*, 2006). Mason (2010) concludes that there is a general agreement that saturation is achieved at a comparatively low level. The saturation point in this study was reached relatively early, i.e. the main themes were present when seven interviews were gathered. Also, the first author's consulting background and expertise in the topic might have reduced the number of participants needed (see Jette, Grover and Keck, 2003). The communication challenges that emerged during the interviews appeared to be similar to what the first author had experienced as an organizational development practitioner.

Each one of the seven MT members, of whom three were female and four male, represented multicultural MTs operating at different levels within different international companies, and they represented a variety of MT positions (i.e. CEO, HR, Finance, Strategy). All the MT members represented diverse industries, including IT, insurance, food, manufacturing, metal and machinery. Four of the companies were Finnish, two were Swedish and one was Japanese. Six interviews were conducted in Finnish and one in English. Each interview lasted about one hour, and all but one of the interviews was conducted in a meeting room in the MT members' office building. One interview was conducted online via mutual synchronous audiovisual connection. There were no significant differences between using different channels or languages. The interviews were recorded, and transcribed by the first author. The duration of the interviews and the number of transcribed pages are presented in the following Table 1.

TABLE 1 Summary of interviews

Order number	Respondent's role	Date of interview	Means of interview	Language of interview	Duration of interview in minutes	Transcribed pages (with 1.5 spacing)
1	Head of (business unit in a country)	21.5.2013	Face-to-Face	Finnish	84	16
2	Director, Finance	3.6.2013	Face-to-Face	English	57	9
3	Senior Vice President, Corporate Human resources	18.6.2013	Face-to-Face	Finnish	51	13
4	CEO	18.6.2013	Face-to-Face	Finnish	48	9
5	Vice President, Business development	19.6.2013	Face-to-Face	Finnish	70	14
6	HR Director	2.7.2013	Skype	Finnish	59	11
7	Vice President, Human Resources	21.8.2013	Face-to-Face	Finnish	64	19
Total duration of interviews in hours: 07:13:00						

The interviews covered themes such as the MT's role and tasks, decision making, participation and the development of MT communication. The anonymity of the MT members has been ensured throughout the study and the results are reported in such a way that the identities of the MT members cannot be revealed. Extracts from the data have been translated from Finnish by the first author.

We analyzed the data by first looking for all references related to communication challenges in MTs. These could be difficulties, concerns or any issues that the interviewees expressed as having to do with the internal communication within their MT. Using thematic analysis, all the references were then grouped into themes, some of which were similar to the themes of the interviews and some of which were new. During further analysis we noticed that the themes started forming pairs, and we developed them into different dimensions. In line with the nature of qualitative research, the analysis was not guided by the number of references but instead we aimed at understanding and making sense of the data (Johnson, 2002).

4. Findings: communication challenges facing MTs

We were able to identify six dimensions that present a range of different communication challenges to MT work. Neither end of the dimension is better or worse than the other end, but rather they are dependent on contextual interpretations. By presenting the results as dimensions, we can appreciate the detailed data and the MT members' perceptions, which were sometimes contradictory.

4.1 Common objectives vs. personal objectives

According to the MT members' perceptions, there seems typically to be tension between the common objectives that are the MT's objectives, and personal, position-related objectives. The MT members emphasized that sometimes the personal objectives, whether it is a country, function or a division, might come into conflict with the common objectives, as the following statements illustrate:

> M3: One of the biggest challenges for us is this divisional structure in which everyone has their own area where they are measured, so it sometimes makes collaboration over boundaries difficult.
>
> M4: […] the main thing in the management team is to take the whole business forward and not only one's own personal area of responsibility.

Also, for some MTs the common objective was clear, but for others there seemed to be a need for development in this area. An unclear common objective can sidetrack the MT away from its proper objective, and it ends up talking about topics that are too detailed or operational, when the discussion should remain on a more strategic level.

4.2 Equally distributed participation vs. polarized participation

The dimension of equally distributed participation versus polarized participation summarizes MT members' perceptions of whether all MT members participate equally actively or if it is only a few members who participate while the rest of the team remain silent. The ability to discuss issues that might be difficult or uncomfortable was seen as an important measure of competent communication. However, expressing oneself openly seems to be a challenge for most MTs, especially during meetings. For instance, MT members described situations in which some MT members do not speak up during meetings but instead share their opinions elsewhere in smaller groups, as the following statement shows:

> M5: It is between meetings when you can hear the truth from other members, and you can ask why did you present this issue like this, so you can get at the real issues […] you get the opinions also of those who have been quieter.

MT members described three different reasons that might affect the amount of participation. First, the position of the MT member can determine when it is the right time and place to contribute. One MT member explained that because of their position some MT members have stronger business orientation than others, and therefore it is natural for them to speak more during the meetings. In contrast, other MT members emphasized that everyone should be able to contribute to all of the discussions, whatever their degree of expertise on the matter in question.

Second, communication by other MT members can discourage or encourage participation. Just as a positive and supportive atmosphere was seen as an important condition for participation, negative comments, rejection and interruptions were seen as preventing it. How a certain communication act was interpreted depended on the context and the perceived intention of the speaker. For example, interrupting was experienced positively if it was done in the form of an inquiry or if the interruption continued to build on the idea already under discussion. The perception was that this form of communication motivates MT members to participate. On the other hand, if an interruption is interpreted as a rejection it can prevent participation, and therefore pose a barrier to competent communication. In general, trust, good relationships and respect for everyone in their own positions were seen as encouraging participation.

The third factor put forward by MT members to explain the amount of participation was personality differences. According to the MT members, personality differences explained why some MT members dominate the conversation and why other MT members do not participate or have difficulty voicing their opinions.

4.3 Leader-centric communication vs. team-centric communication

MT members highlighted the role of the leader, who in most cases was the CEO or the president of the business unit. According to the MT members, the leader's role is crucial in determining how team members participate in MT communication during and outside meetings, and this shapes the decision-making processes. Also, the role of the leader is seen as crucial not only to the communication culture of the MT but also to the entire company, as the following comment reflects:

> M6: It's a very big role. It's significant for the atmosphere of the whole company, hence to the management team.

On the other hand, one MT member said that in a well functioning team with a good level of communication the role of the leader does not have to be central.

Change and development in the team's communication culture was often seen as something that only the leader could directly affect. One example of the leader's impact was brought out in a story in which the change of the CEO led to a company-wide culture change and efforts to develop the leadership in a new direction, because the new CEO had a different communication style than the previous CEO. Other MT members also emphasized that when the leader changes the communication within the team will change.

The leader's strong role was mainly seen as positive, although the leader might tend to dominate the communication and therefore reduce the participation of others. One MT member explained that sometimes the leader dominates the discussion because of being excited and enthusiastic about his or her work.

4.4 Consensus decision-making vs. unilateral decision-making
Decision making, and clarifying the decision-making process, were often mentioned as development needs during the interviews. The dimension of consensus vs. unilateral decision-making refers to the question of who participates in decision-making: whether it is the whole MT that makes the decision, or just the leader, or a smaller group within the MT. Problems related to decision making were lack of clarity in the decision-making process, participation in decision making, and the absence of joint decisions.

The ideal decision-making process, according to MT members, is equal and open; information is given early enough for all MT members to have time to familiarize themselves with it before the MT meeting. Instead of this ideal, MT members spoke about their experiences when clear decisions were not made, or when nobody kept track of the decisions that were made. Lobbying outside the boardroom, and trying to get support from another authority, for example from the function leader or the CEO, were also mentioned. Also, one MT member said that often the leader had already made the decision before the meeting, or the decision had been made elsewhere by other MT members. A lack of involvement in decision-making may reduce overall commitment, as described by a MT member:

> M1: It's really an unbearable situation when some people have already talked and agreed on something. And then it's (the decision) presented like the thing is like this and the rest of the team don't know anything.

However, working in smaller teams or in pairs could be experienced positively because it is easier then to prepare the decisions. Gaining support for one's personal objectives could also be seen as positive, because by talking to other MT members beforehand one can get to know who is in favor of your idea and who is not.

4.5 Formal communication vs. informal communication
The dimension of formal and informal communication refers to the difference between communication during and outside meetings, communication at work compared to communication in one's free time, and the content of communication. A lot of the communication challenges were related to the meetings, which MT members perceived as being more formal than the other forums of communication. In particular, the topics on the agenda were connected to formal communication, and there seemed to be a desire to add more informal communication to the meetings.

Informal communication was also related to a more relaxed atmosphere, which was experienced as happening outside the meeting room and even outside the work context. One reason for experiencing the other communication forums as informal could be that "there is a less political agenda" than in the meetings, as one MT member put it. MT members explained that it is important to spend time together doing something that is not work-related, because that enables team members to get to know each other, establish relationships and develop trust, as demonstrated by one MT member:

> M2: […] speaking in informal context, about things outside the business as well, which is also important for building relationships.

Informal communication was also connected to speaking about team-related issues, such as team development or giving and receiving feedback. These kinds of topics are

not usually on the agenda for a meeting, but rather they are discussed outside that context, often during a team development day, which might be held once a year.

4.6 Face-to-face communication vs. ICT assisted communication

As the MT members represented multicultural MTs that use communication technology in their collaboration, it was emphasized that communication has to flow on many levels and in many different forums – not only in official meetings and face-to-face. Although many MT members reported that they use ICT in their communication, mostly video conferencing, email and telephone, much MT communication is still dependent on face-to-face communication, especially in MT meetings. Phone and email were used mainly for one-to-one communication between MT members.

Video conferencing was occasionally used for MT meetings. However, in most cases the meetings were arranged in such a way that there were some MT members who were participating face-to-face in the same location while others were participating online. Interestingly, the MT members experienced the meetings with the whole team present face-to-face as both more informal and more genuine than online meetings, as shown by the following comment:

> M7: The best meetings have been those where we are face-to-face, because the discussion is genuine and open.

5. Discussion

As illustrated in this study, the interviewed MT members have versatile experiences related to internal MT communication. Although they stated that they very rarely discuss communication issues within their respective MT, the interviewees showed capability in analyzing MT communication and reflecting on the internal communication of their team and their own part in it. With a qualitative approach we were able to explore the unique and contextual challenges within internal MT communication as the MT members experience them (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Lessem and Baruch (2000) have pointed out that very few studies have explored the top team performance as a team. This study has illustrated the essential themes (presented as dimensions) that the MT members experience and perceive as central in MT communication and teamwork.

The aim of this study was to understand what kinds of communication challenges MTs face, in order to develop competent communication. Based on our findings we suggest that MTs need first, to develop awareness of the communication challenges they are facing, and second, to learn to discuss those challenges in a constructive manner by establishing a reflective practice, which allows them to further develop MT reflexivity (Schippers *et al*., 2012) and implement competent communication practices. In the following Figure 1 we present the dimensions and how they are linked to competent communication.

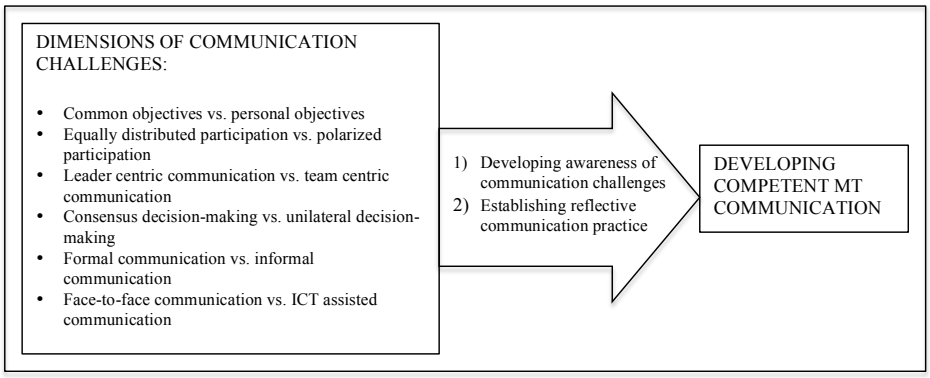

FIGURE 1 Communication challenges and developing competent MT communication

This study adds to the previous studies on CCC. In Thompson's (2009) study communication processes that prevented competent communication were negative humor and sarcasm, debating expertise, communicating boredom and jockeying for power. According to the findings in our study negative comments about others, the rejection of ideas and interrupting can all challenge the development of competent communication (shown in the dimension of *equally distributed participation vs. polarized participation*). Similarly, previous research has shown that a fear of negative consequences can prevent participation during meetings (Milliken *et al*., 2003). Also Bang's (2013) study on miscommunication indicated that MT members believe that expressing concern can be damaging not only for oneself but also for team performance.

The findings of this study suggest that MTs should pay more attention to their informal communication, and particularly during meetings. Informal communication enables trust and relationships within the teams (Fay and Kline, 2012). Besides getting to know each other and spending time together, in this study, informal communication was also linked to reflecting on and discussing team-related issues, such as team development. Successful MTs are capable of informal dialogue and have time for reflection (Doz and Kosonen, 2007). However, there seems to be relatively little time, if any, for such topics during regular MT meetings. Although many MT members shared examples of how they try to provide feedback during the meetings, most of the team development is done outside the work context.

The current trend in organization development highlights the integration of development into the daily routines and practices of MTs (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011). This insight offers an important opportunity for both scholars and practitioners. The question is how MTs can create informal and reflective communication practices that will allow them to discuss the interplay between how they communicate and how they get their work done (Takeuchi and Nonaka, 2004). Continuously reflecting on MT communication practices and core processes such as decision making as part of the meeting as well as during other communication forums could improve team performance (Schippers *et al*., 2012).

As the strategy-as-practice perspective suggest (Jarzabkowski *et al*. 2007), the MT meetings offer a fruitful platform for team development. The strategy-as-practice research has shown that the conduct of a meeting affects how strategic issues gain momentum during meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2006). This indicates that in order to develop competent communication practice it is necessary not only to create a reflective space within the meeting but also to pay attention to how the

conversations are organized within that space. For instance, the dimensions presented in this study could work as a starting point for MTs to discuss major issues related to how they communicate and collaborate. When introducing organizational development interventions in the context of MT communication, practitioners could focus more on the dialogical spaces instead of on individual leaders and their skills. The dialogic approach to organizational development has introduced many intervention techniques focusing on the communicative nature of organizations. Approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), Art of Hosting (Bushe and Marshak, 2014b), to name but a few, aim at developing competent communication practices that enable people to respond and act in turbulent situations. In times of rapid change it is important for management teams to have their own development on the agenda all the time.

6. Conclusions

Although this study makes valuable contributions to MT research and literature it does not come without limitations. The first limitation is the number of interviews, which was relatively small. Getting access to top levels in organizations is challenging, and despite articulating the confidentiality of the research when approaching organizations, many MT members did not respond or they rejected the request. However, the aim of this study was to explore and understand the complexities of MT communication rather than produce a certain amount of data. With this approach we have gained new insights into the communication challenges within internal MT communication.

A second limitation to this study is that each MT member represented his or her whole MT. Although the communication challenges were surprisingly similar in spite the MT position and industry represented, the true nature of the challenges and how they are dealt are always contextual and team-related. Also, in the present study we focused mainly on the internal communication of MTs. During the interviews, however, many MT members brought up the differences between external and internal communication. In order to understand MT communication holistically, it is important to study MTs within their external context. MT level communication competence can only be evaluated and assessed within the context of the larger organization (Beebe and Barge, 1994).

The findings of this study could be further developed in a setting that occurs naturally for the entire MTs. That means applying a more constructionist approach to research design and using recordings of authentic MT communication. For example, using a strategy-as-practice approach (Jarzabkowski *et al*., 2007) to study MT meetings could be a worthwhile future direction. Further, new directions could be taken in order to focus on developing communication competence within MTs and on understanding the interplay of communication challenges and competent communication practices. Various global and intercultural contexts would provide fruitful possibilities for future research of communication challenges within MTs. In addition, this study opens possibilities for quantitative studies. One could for example develop a survey based on the dimensions of communication challenges, and further explore where different MTs would position themselves within the dimensions.

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