



Unmuddling Teams

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An Internet survey asked workers what they missed least back at the office while out traveling. Most (30.7 percent) said “putting out fires.” Other top vote-getters were frequent meetings and “the boss hovering around.” This survey did not rate noise or the general presence of coworkers as primary concerns (USA Today, 1999).

What office workers seemed to dislike most about being in the office space had to do with interruptions or unwelcome interactions. The problem with interruptions is that once concentration is broken, it can take a while to restore.

Still, if a team is going to function effectively, team members need to be accessible to each other. Electronic connectivity does not fully replace the experience of shared space. If team members routinely leave for off-site or home offices to avoid interruptions, the putting-out-fires burden unfairly shifts to those who stay. Those who leave also miss out on the information-rich team environment.

Space Shift

Work in general is shifting from mostly individual task performance to collaborative efforts where work gets done by groups, often in group spaces. Even so, individual team members continue to have their own research, thinking, and writing to accomplish, and often prefer quieter space for those activities.

With teams becoming a core element in how work and workspaces are organized, worker requests for privacy may seem out of place. Teams are bringing about a reallocation of office space that reduces the role of private space in the work setting.

The *Future Perspectives* survey (1999) found that dedicated team space made up five percent of overall office building space, but was expected to reach 12 percent by 2003. During that period, private office space was expected to drop from 23 to 16 percent of overall space, and cubicle space was expected to drop from 50 to 47 percent. A reduced role for private space, however, does not mean that the need for some type of personal space has disappeared. It may be more important than ever.

An Innate Need for Shelter

Grant Hildebrand explored the idea that humans have an innate need for protection from accessibility in *The Origins of Architectural Pleasure* (1999).

Hildebrand traced our preference for places of refuge back to what humans have cumulatively learned about life on earth. Because we don't have shells, claws, or other built-in defenses, humans have learned to instinctively seek protection in sheltered, refuge-type spaces when feeling apprehensive or besieged. Hildebrand stated that “windowless corner spaces, spaces closed on three sides, spaces of small dimension with low ceilings, and prevalent solid walls announce themselves as protective retreats within the totality of an architectural interior.”

Refuges, he explained, “convey the possibility for hiding and therefore for safety...we seek them as we seek food and water.” The counterbalance to refuge is prospect — the ability to see out from a semi-enclosed area into a larger space. In this type of space, you are protected but not isolated.

Hildebrand also offered that large open spaces with abundant light cause people to talk louder and actively engage with the space. Shopping malls, for example, routinely use tall atriums filled with natural light because those elements slow shoppers down and encourage them impulsively visit more stores than they had planned. Conversely, darker spaces, narrow aisles, and low ceilings cause people to quiet down, move quickly, and keep to themselves. These are not spaces that openly encourage casual drop-ins.

All Together Now

It's tempting to simply put the whole team into a large, bright room that combines personal and gathering space, or to put the cubicles along the window wall and recess gathering spaces in the interior of the building. However, these types of spaces may not support the psychological uptime for group processes or private downtime for concentration that team members need.

A better solution may be to look at the overall space and make allocation decisions that consider the behavioral impact various types of spaces have on groups and individuals.

Allocation ideas to consider:

- Use the brightest areas of the building for team gathering spaces — let the light energize group interactions.
- If an area with a high ceiling is available, use it for team space to prompt interaction.
- Because groups in bright areas tend to talk loudly, plan for appropriate acoustic support.
- Allow areas for individual cubicles to have less intense light, although indirect or controllable access to natural light is still desirable.
- A slightly lower light level in the cubicle area can cause passing traffic to keep moving and quiet down. It can also help reduce monitor glare.
- Individual spaces should have some type of privacy element on at least one side to provide a sense of refuge and personal space. Some people will want screening on up to three sides. That preference should be accommodated. It's even better if screening can be user controlled.
- If personal spaces can offer a view out over group space, while preserving the sense of refuge, that's the best of both worlds. People will have a sense of what's going on without having to be in the middle of it.
- For contract or virtual office workers who don't have a personal workstation, making a hoteling station or small room available allows them to stay near the team but still have a place for intensive solo work.
- Coworkers can be encouraged to email non-emergency messages to those at work in their own personal spaces, so questions can be answered at a convenient time.

These may be subtle differences in space use, but by tapping into our innate responses to space, light, and interaction, we may be able to make peace with the team-versus-personal space dilemma and keep team members working effectively together.

References

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