

Experience Report: When Developer + Tester = Success

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ABSTRACT

Some organizations have development and test groups that work very well together. Some even see these groups consistently deliver projects that meet or even exceed customer expectations. It isn't just pure luck to work in such an organization! It is possible to create an environment where developers and testers work closely together, support one another, and deliver quality products.

INTRODUCTION

"I don't want your testers in the same meetings as my developers," Fred said to the new test manager. "They will get in the way, and use the information they hear to make us look bad. I don't want your testers around us."

The test manager, Michelle, was surprised to hear this. She thought her interactions with Fred had been positive so far, so she wondered where this statement had come from. Having been in similar situations before, Michelle realized this probably wasn't personal.

Michelle inquired, "Fred, I'm curious to hear what experiences you have had that may have caused you to make this request. Have you been in a situation before like the one you just referred to?"

Looking surprised, Fred replied, "Uh, yes. Why do you ask?"

... Does this situation sound familiar to you? Were you able to obtain buy-in from the developers to participate in the same meetings as them, or did nothing actually improve? This paper explores some of the techniques that have helped change hostile organizations into healthier ones, including the one that Fred and Michelle worked in.

LISTEN

When experiencing a situation where you are being kept out of the loop or unfairly blamed, it is easy to respond with anger. That response often makes the situation worse though, and causes other problems that will need to be dealt with later on.

A better approach is to take a deep breath, calm down, and listen. Understanding where the other person is coming from is an important first step in working towards a mutually agreeable resolution. Let them talk out their frustration, then start asking some questions to show your interest. Probe gently so you don't come across aggressively. For example:

Find out about them and their experiences by using 'what, where, how' questions. This will help them open up to a discussion.

- What expectations do they have of the test group?
- What value do they see in the test group?
- How could the test group change to provide more value?
- What do they need from the test group to succeed?

In Michelle's situation, asking questions like these showed that she was interested in Fred, his experiences, and his perspectives. They set Fred at ease because Michelle was not attacking him or defending her position, she was simply curious to learn more about him.

BE PERSONABLE

It is difficult to maintain a hostile relationship with someone who is friendly and is interested in you as a person. Building positive relationships with your colleagues will not only make your work more enjoyable, but also more successful. It is important to be genuine in your interactions with the other person, so you are not thought to be deceitful.

It may take time to build a good relationship out of a hostile one, but it will make working with the other person a lot easier. The added bonus would be actually liking the other person, and gaining a respected colleague in the process. Some approaches include:

- Smile in greeting. Say 'Hello', 'Good Morning', and 'Good Night'. People appreciate the gesture, and usually can't help but smile in return.

- Use your manners. 'Please', and 'Thank You' can make a world of difference when employed genuinely. Let the other person know when you appreciate the work they have done. Most people like to hear they are appreciated, and will lean towards working with you, instead of against you.
- Ask about their day, or their weekend. Showing interest in the other person outside of work specific topics will start creating a relationship that can be built upon.
- Take the other person out for coffee, or even lunch. Spending time together outside of the office will strengthen the foundation for a relationship. At this point, you may be starting to view each other as real people (not just the annoying person you work with).
- When you are ready, start asking basic questions about their family and experiences. Most people will respond in kind. At this stage you may be starting to build a casual relationship.

In Michelle's case, she made an effort to stop by and chat with Fred for a few minutes every day. While Fred was initially suspicious about Michelle's intentions, he realized after a short time that she was genuinely interested in talking with him. He liked being treated respectfully, and not being just another developer to her... Now he was a distinct person.

FOSTER OPEN COMMUNICATION

Most people do not want to work with someone they believe to be deceiving. Someone who keeps information from others, is not open to hearing feedback from other people, or even lies, is an easy person to be hostile with. This behaviour is in opposition to creating an open environment where people discuss and collaborate freely, and will quickly put you in a position of working in a negative environment.

Taking the first steps in creating an environment of open communication can be challenging, especially in one where others behave adversely. In that situation, it is time to suck it up and lead by example. It may take some time for your actions to rub off on other people, but they will in time (particularly when using the other techniques noted). Some approaches include:

- Speak openly and respectfully about what is on your mind. Sharing your thoughts with others will result in their believing that you are not hiding things from them (and you shouldn't be!).
- Focus discussions for problems on processes and projects. While many problems are people problems, focusing on the people will come across

as an attack in many situations. You want to engage the other person, not have them stop communicating with you.

- Welcome feedback and suggestions from other people. Then follow through on some of the ideas and feedback (especially those that makes sense to implement). This shows people that you respect their opinion and trust their judgment.
- When a problem arises, ask the other person if they would be open to suggestions you have. If yes, offer some ideas for how to proceed. From that point, suggest a trial run in implementing an idea. If it is not working out, it can then be reevaluated or stopped. With this approach, you are asking for their permission to offer advice and proceed with a solution, rather than forcing one upon them.

Michelle's situation required her to first listen to Fred, and find out more about what caused him to feel the way he did. When Fred was opening up to her, she continued by asking him if she could suggest some options. After Fred agreed, she suggested having the testers and developers attend the same meetings, and to evaluate each week whether it was problematic. Fred agreed since he knew he could stop it if he was not satisfied. In the end it proved to not be a problem, so the joint meetings and discussions became a regular occurrence.

THE WHOLE TEAM APPROACH

In many organizations, people forget that everyone working on a project is actually working on the same team. It is easy to niche each other into 'developers', 'testers', 'project managers', etc. When that happens, it becomes very easy to point fingers and blame the other groups for problems.

In reality though, regardless of job title, everyone working on a project is part of a larger team, with a similar end goal in mind: Complete the project on time while meeting or exceeding customer expectations. This requires a change in mindset to work together to accomplish the end goal, taking a 'whole team approach'. This includes:

- Recognize and communicate that you are in this together – no matter what!
- The 'We' mentality – using 'We' instead of 'Me' or 'You'. It is a valuable change in communication, as people stop feeling blamed and behaving defensively.
- Remember the project and company success is dependant on successful completion and delivery by everyone.

- Communicate and collaborate early and often – this will save everyone time and frustration later on.
- Work through problems as a team, without placing blame. Focus on finding solutions together in order to move forward.
- Do whatever it takes as a team to get it done, regardless of job title or documented responsibilities. Team work is an important part of the job.
- Be appreciative and thankful for the work that your teammates are doing.

In Michelle's situation, in addition to the other changes she had made, Michelle made a concerted effort to change the language she used when talking about the project and problems. She found the term 'We' to be particularly effective as problems that arose from a particular group were taken on collectively by the entire team, so nobody was put on the spot. The group in question was then more likely to own up to their mistakes, and work with the rest of the team to resolve them.

BUILD TRUST

The most important factor in changing a hostile environment into a healthy environment is building trust. It is the one thing that will make or break relationships or change initiatives. It can be difficult to acquire, and is quite fragile. Some key factors to consider in building trust with any colleague, but especially those less than friendly ones, include:

- Do what you say you will do. People find it difficult to trust others who do not follow through on tasks they have signed up for.
- Build relationships. People are more inclined to trust those people they know as a colleague, and particularly as a friend. Keeping your distance from others can impede your ability to work in a positive environment.
- Keep private conversations private. You do not want to be known as a gossip, or as someone who can not be trusted to keep confidential information to themselves. This is one of the easiest ways to lose trust.
- Show competence and intelligence. Unfairly or not, people will trust others who have shown that they know what they are talking about in relation to their job. If people think you do not have the knowledge required to do your job, you will quickly be dismissed and overlooked.
- Follow through in good faith on the other techniques described so far.

In Michelle's case, she continued changing how she interacted with Fred and other colleagues, to the notice of those around her. Michelle's situation improved greatly since the noted interaction in the weeks following. She could be trusted to complete her work, was trustworthy in keeping confidential information to herself, and proved to understand the technology and processes she was working with.

Over time, Michelle observed that Fred became supportive of her and her team. He and his developers began to interact frequently with her and her team for advice about software design, troubleshooting issues, and processes. He also became an advocate for early involvement of the test group in project life cycles, and the need to hire more testers to keep up with the heavy workload. Michelle was pleased to have not only gained a positive and healthier work environment, but also a respected colleague and friend.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the situation you find yourself in, approach it congruently. Realize that there may be something going on for the other person that has nothing to do with you. Learn what you can by asking questions so as not to make assumptions about their intentions or their reasoning. Do your best to speak openly and honestly with the other person, regardless of how distressing it may seem.

The techniques that can be employed to create an environment where developers and testers work together successfully are more numerable than the ones outlined in this paper. They are a good starting point, and will make a positive impact. Remember to:

- Listen
- Be Personable
- Foster Open Communication
- Employ a Whole Team Approach, and
- Build Trust.

Working in a positive and healthy environment with those around you is not impossible. While being an agent of change can be scary, each of us has the power to create such an environment. It can be achieved with diligence, awareness of self and others, and a positive outlook.

Best of luck in creating your own success story!