Easier Said Than Done: Interpersonal Dynamics in Professional

Environments

“If you just communicate, everything will be fine!” When navigating

conflict-resolution in the workplace, this could seem like the easy answer to all of our

problems. However, communication comes in many different forms and is used for

different purposes amongst professionals. Communicating that I finished my work is

very different from communicating why it’s hard to work with someone. When a team of

people are trying to achieve a common goal in a professional environment,

communication across the team not only helps logistically achieve the goal, but it

maintains social cohesion between members. Even if the tasks are getting done

because logistical communication is maintained, social cohesion can fall apart

unsuspectedly if interpersonal dynamics are not considered. In this essay we first

outline dimensions of effective communication (context, structure, and timing); and

then how social cohesion can be maintained in the contexts of conflict-resolution and

feedback.

Effective communication

For communication to be effective, it’s a lot more complicated than just saying

everything in our minds. It’s too often the case where too many words from one person

is burdensome on others or the words are actually unproductive to the task at hand. To

understand what makes communication effective, I consider the following factors:

context, structure, and timing.

Context

Before even considering the content of what needs to be communicated, it’s

crucial to understand the context in which the communication will happen. If the

communicator doesn’t acknowledge the context, their message will not be accepted so

easily. What do I mean by context? Context can be the professional environment in

which the communication takes place (e.g. office, outside, kitchen), how many people

are in the conversation (e.g. 1 manager vs. 50 employees), employee status (e.g.

manager vs. entry level). However, context can be very personal to the people involved

including stress and energy levels.

Consider the following scenario: you are meeting with an engineer and you asked

them how they were (to build rapport), they tell you that they are swamped with

deliverables. The purpose of your meeting with them was to ask them for another

deliverable. Someone might overlook the engineer’s situation and simply continue with

giving them a deliverable. I predict that if you were to do this, there would be some

tension between you and the engineer. One might say that there’s no way to avoid

making the engineer’s situation harder if you are obligated to introduce a new

deliverable to them. However, I argue that a more effective way of communicating this is

by acknowledging the context in which the engineer is coming from. “I understand that

you already have a lot on your plate and I don’t want to make it harder on you.” Even

though it might seem fruitless to state the obvious, now the engineer knows that you

empathize and acknowledge the situation. Ideally, you could work with the engineer to

prioritize their deliverables and the engineer would be more receptive to what you were

asking for. People underestimate how sharing and acknowledging context paves the

way for effective communication.

Another way people establish context is through norm building. As put in

Wodtke’s lecture: “If you don’t set norms, you make assumptions. Assumptions lead to

errors. Errors lead to fights,” (Wodtke). People make assumptions all the time about the

current context. They assume that you are willing to hear what they have to say. They

will assume that you won’t yell at them for making a mistake. There are endless

possibilities for what can be assumed by people and unfortunately, some of those

assumptions will lead to unproductive communication. Setting norms is a great

preventative measure for reducing assumptions and guiding everyone towards an

effective discussion. For example, in my current project team, I assumed that the team

would turn in deliverables the same way I’ve experienced in the past: we would all come

to an agreement the assignment was ready to be turned in and then someone would do

it. However, because this norm was not established, I was shocked when members of

the team began turning in assignments without the oversight of other members. They

would retroactively ask people to look at the work. What happens if there’s no oversight?

Errors are made. Oversight would have prevented these mistakes. Even though we set

norms as a team, some norms are overlooked because of assumptions made from

previous experiences. Fortunately, there have been efforts to get more eyes on the

assignments but it is worth making these details as explicit as possible from the

beginning. Norm building is important for establishing context.

Structure

Imagine that I’m going to tell you a list of 50 reasons why technology is beneficial

in education. It takes me 25 minutes to get through all the reasons and I don’t leave

room for comments. You remember the first 5 reasons, but by the time I get to the 6th

reason, all of the information is through one ear and out the other. Now imagine that at

the end of the long list, I tell you the 3 most important reasons why technology is

beneficial. Those 3 benefits will be memorable. This is a scenario of how the structure

of communication is very important. In this case, summaries synthesize information

and establish what is important to remember. Even if I’m talking to someone for 5-10

minutes, it’s cognitively relieving when someone summarizes what they said.

I believe the effective structure of communication consists of cycles of giving

information and synthesis. Tell all the details, then summarize. This is why essays are

commonly formatted with conclusions for each block of information. Effective

communication is structured by details and synthesis.

Timing

Time is money, especially in professional contexts. Sometimes, meetings are

capped by time constraints. Even if there aren’t explicit time constraints, there are

implicit norms on how long people should be talking given the context. Let’s say you are

on a design team of 4 people quickly brainstorming ideas for a new feature. People are

taking turns contributing 1 minute ideas to get as many as possible. But, one team

member starts droning on for 10 minutes about an idea and the other members get

frustrated. There aren’t any rules for how long people should talk but some people have

an intuition for how long given the situation. This is such a useful skill in professional

contexts because being too concise or too verbose can be unproductive. Establishing

explicit rules and using timers is one way to combat the situation. But, most likely, you

will pick up on patterns. If there are more people in the room, you might be more on the

concise side. If someone is asking for more detail, you have the opportunity to be more

verbose. Personally, I will try as the listener to be explicit about the timing of

communication so neither of us gets frustrated.

I wanted to emphasize here that yes, it is an issue if people are too concise or not

detailed enough. Some people rather let others take the floor because they don’t want to

come off as verbose, too controlling, etc. But, the lack of words and detail when needed

can make decision-making ineffective. It can potentially signal to people that you aren’t

putting in effort, even when you think you are. Understanding when one needs to be

detailed versus concise is crucial to effective communication.

Improvements

Given the three dimensions of effective communication that I outlined (context,

structure, and timing), I am most effective at structure and timing. I actively synthesize

my thoughts and others. Generally, I do my best to make sure that I’m taking up space

when needed. However, the most challenging part of effective communication is

understanding context, which came up in my CS 177 team feedback (stated differently).

I need to do better in acknowledging the context and not assuming that people will be

ready to accept decisions or asks. Sometimes, especially if I notice indecision from

many team members, I will take the reins to reduce time lost. I rather make decisions

than wait for decisions that may or may not come. However, some people still want

autonomy in accepting the decision. I need to make sure that everyone is on the same

page and that there’s enough room for dissent even if they were initially unsure. I strive

to understand the context in order to effectively communicate.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Even with perfect, effective communication amongst a team, professional teams

can’t completely avoid conflicts altogether. Communicating effectively will definitely

help smooth the process of negotiation, but there are a number of practices to consider

when navigating conflict.

1. Prepare

a. Before entering negotiations, it’s best you come to a meeting having as

much evidence as you can about your stance. You don’t have to have as

much evidence as a lawyer, but knowing a couple points that you’re going

to say is enough.

b. In the finance world, they have something called BATNA: Best Alternative

To a Negotiated Agreement. Go into conversations having an alternative

plan or view if your position is invalidated (Corporate Finance Institute).

2. Time and Scope

a. Acknowledge the time and scope to resolve the conflict! The biggest

mistake is letting a conflict drag on and being inconsiderate of time.

b. Sometimes people think that they have to resolve the conflict in the

moment when some conflicts take longer.

3. Context

a. Start with getting both parties on the same page. Settle on context and

any assumptions.

b. Both parties acknowledge any gaps in assumptions (without judgment)

c. Present evidence for those gaps in assumptions

4. Next Steps

a. Some people think that compromising their position is the only way to

resolve a conflict but Harvard Business School says otherwise. You can

accommodate, compromise, or collaborate based on the needs of the

situation.

b. They say that when “your goal and the relationship are equally important”,

it will motivate both you and the other party to collaborate on finding a

resolution (Cote).

There are times where none of these strategies will work; you will understand,

empathize, compromise, etc. and it’s still less than ideal. Knowing when the

environment is not set up for your success is also an extremely important insight. For

example, in the Office Romance Gone Wrong case study, experts advised the

protagonist (who had relationship conflict at work) to think about financial

consequences before considering quitting the job: “stick it out until stock options have

vested,” (Bearden). Sometimes, you maintain logistical and social cohesion temporarily,

so that you find other opportunities to be in a better environment or position later on.

Lastly, don’t underestimate the strength in numbers. As seen in the case study of

Give Your Colleague the Rating He Deserves, the protagonist is unsure how to evaluate

their colleague and confides in a peer mentor for advice (Mayo et. al.). One doesn’t have

to go into conflict alone and we often need a fresh perspective to determine the best

resolution.

My Core Principles

A few core conflict-resolution principles that I strive to uphold include always

acknowledging context/assumptions; empathizing before reacting; and collaborating

over compromising. I’ve touched on a lot about the importance of context in this essay,

but understanding context makes conflict-resolution much more efficient. If people skip

this step, you are likely to make errors as you try to resolve it and get frustrated that you

didn’t know the context before starting. On that note, reacting is really easy to do when

frustrated. Emotions run high during conflict (which is important to acknowledge), but

often escalate conflict in unproductive ways. The main way, I believe, to avoid escalation

is to go back to empathy. Understand the other person’s position to the point where it’s

convincing. Lastly, I’ve learned through Cotes that compromise is not the only option;

work with people to find a better solution when possible. In a team, it’s better to frame

conflict-resolution as a collaborative endeavor rather than a lose-lose competition. All

these strategies will help maintain social cohesion when navigating conflict in a

professional environment.

Feedback Insights

Negotiation happens all the time in the context of giving and receiving feedback.

Feedback is used for logistical progression within a team i.e. getting the task done,

getting the best version of our goal, etc. However, feedback is used to maintain daily

social cohesion (interpersonal dynamics) i.e. the way people communicate for different

instances. How do I give you feedback on the work you’re doing versus the way you give

a presentation? Whether it’s for work or communication style, there are some general

guidelines we can follow to give and receive constructive feedback effectively.

Feedback can get unwieldy especially when one is passionate about a topic, the

job, another person, etc. Someone who is an expert at giving constructive feedback

could give too much at the wrong time. This is why it’s critical that givers of feedback

understand HOW much feedback to give at what TIME. The 30/60/90 framework for

feedback breaks feedback into three parts, “each representing a percentage of progress

through the whole process or project”: 30% being high level, 60% being the bulk of all

possible feedback, and 90% being everything down to the nitty gritty details (Atlassian).

Separating feedback in these buckets and knowing which bucket to tap in to can save

teams lots of time. If I ask you for feedback on the content of the presentation, and you

criticize the colors I used, there’s misalignment in the feedback framework. It’s better to

be explicit about what stage of feedback a team is looking for.

This framework works wonders for the giver of feedback, but the receiver can

also shape the feedback interaction, as well. Targeting feedback is super useful for the

receiver as you know at least a little bit what to expect from the giver. Instead of asking

my team members “could you give me feedback on this?” or “does this look good?”, I

strive to be more specific. “I’m unsure about this part of the assignment. Can you look at

this [topic] and tell me if you think the same way?” As the receiver, I help the giver focus

their attention on things that may need more or detailed feedback. Especially if people

are more inclined to be ‘less detailed’, targeting feedback helps people focus on at least

one thing.

Feedback & Personal Growth

The 30/60/90 framework and targeting feedback are two strategies that I will

definitely take into my career. Especially, because I want to be in the digital design

industry, there are many feedback cycles that I will be a part of. It’s essential that I make

these practices consistent in order to be an effective team member for a long period of

time. From the team I’m currently on for CS 177, I’ve received feedback that I am good

at making informed decisions and taking initiative when needed. However, sometimes I

take charge because I think other people are indecisive. But, I’ve learned that some

people will take charge when they are ready and I have to be ready to let go of power.

Yes, it’s frustrating when someone doesn’t take charge when you want them too, but you

also have to leave room for them when they do. I realized that people both like my

initiative and also want me to let go of my initiative. In other words, they made me

realize the flux in power between people and you have to be willing to let go sometimes.

This feedback will prepare me for those shifts in power and maintain social cohesion

when I’m working on design teams.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed strategies for effective communication across the

dimensions of context, structure, and timing. Understanding context of the

communication; structuring communication with synthesis; and determining

appropriate conciseness are key to effectiveness. Communicating effectively –

especially acknowledging context and assumptions – contributes heavily to resolving

conflict between people. But, also reframing resolution as collaborative rather than

compromising can help maintain social cohesion in professional settings with both

parties working together to build a common outcome. Lastly, in these collaborative

settings, feedback needs to be shaped and curated by both giver and receiver.

Establishing rules e.g. 30/60/90 for what feedback to expect from each other helps

both progress the goal in productive ways and minimize dissonance between people. All

of this is to say interpersonal dynamics is actually where the money is at. When you

learn to effectively communicate, minimize conflict, have effective feedback cycles, and

maintain social cohesion, teams can do amazing things.

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