Interpersonal Dynamics

Working in a team is something we begin to learn in preschool, yet it remains a challenge throughout adulthood. Why? Our unique backgrounds shape what we view as normal, creating diverse perspectives that both fuel an interdisciplinary team’s success and form the largest obstacle in productive collaboration. As Dale Carnegie writes in How to Win Friends and Influence People, “When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion.” As emotional beings, we often struggle to accept criticism and feedback that’s crucial for improving team dynamics.

Despite these challenges, interdisciplinary teams create unmatched potential for creativity and innovation (Tang, 2019). For instance, interdisciplinary physician teams improve patient outcomes (Indeed Editorial Team, 2024) and groups of designers with varying expertise expands the pool of solutions (Aroian, 2016). Moreover, the digital era of work provides a medium for diverse teams to assemble regularly, so we must all be prepared to partake.

In this essay, I will draw on my experiences from both amazing teams—my water polo team, restaurant coworkers, group projects, and my internship—and poorly-functioning teams, including other group projects and internships. I argue that through setting clear goals, defining roles, and establishing norms, then checking in and providing regular feedback, interdisciplinary teams can thrive.

Communication: Calibrating Goals, Roles, and Norms

Effective communication begins with a shared understanding of the team’s goals. I learned this the hard way during a disastrous group project in CS 147. Our team, meant to have four people, consisted of three: two of us cared deeply about the project, while the third only wanted to pass and focused more on his side job. Naturally, we were misaligned in our expectations. I wanted to create the best possible project; my friend wanted an A; and our third teammate wanted to scrape by. Insults were thrown, tears were shed, and long messages were sent to the TA. At the time I felt frustrated and wronged. Upon reflection, it is laughably obvious why we failed: we had zero common purpose.

When teams share explicit, communal objectives, each member can better align their efforts. This can be done implicitly—like when I worked as a hostess and my coworkers shared a simple goal of providing a great customer experience to boost tips—or explicitly, as in more complex team settings like the workplace and class. My CS project would have benefited from a clear, shared goal: “Earn the highest grade possible while working just 10 hours per week.”

Setting purely qualitative goals is not always enough (Wodtke, 2017). Instead, OKRs combine both qualitative and quantitative goals, energizing members who value a common purpose and those driven by measurable targets. This was overwhelmingly evident during my internship at Alpine Investors, where every employee could articulate the firm’s mission and quantitative results required to achieve it. The clarity grounded our work in a common purpose and created a strong sense of community.

Equally important is setting communication norms, meaning teams cannot default into interactions. My CS 177 group project has successfully set norms to avoid stress and conflict; my favorite, “If a team member has not made progress on a task but it is before the deadline we set, do not pester them” has allowed us to work in our own styles while respecting each other’s process.

At Alpine, I experienced the power of setting norms early from the first call with my manager, who said“I always begin meetings on time.” Throughout the summer, we both prioritized punctuality, consistently notifying each other af we anticipated even the smallest delay—sometimes just two minutes. It’s important to note the distinction between norm-setting in work versus school. Class teams typically set norms collectively. In a work setting, it’s sometimes the responsibility of lower-level employees to adapt to their manager’s norms, as I learned in my end-of-summer review when my manager suggested I more quickly calibrate “how much does this guy want me to bug him.”

Finally, a team must understand each member’s role in order to function smoothly. In my water polo and restaurant jobs, roles were obvious: I played on the strong side, my teammate played center; I was the hostess, my coworker was the busser. In professional settings, role clarity is equally crucial, and it’s helpful when teams complement each other’s strengths.

Conflict: Taking Ownership and Saving Face

After setting goals, norms, and roles, teams must check in frequently enough to prevent issues. A simple weekly standup can suffice. However, some conflicts are inevitable. When conflict arises, I rely on three principles: 1) curating a positive environment, 2) reflecting on my own role in the issue, and 3) avoiding assumptions about others’ intentions.

First, creating a positive environment for conflict resolution is essential. This means actively listening, removing distractions, and addressing issues in real-time (Reynolds, 2022). Taking these steps, as opposed to passive comments or email exchanges, solves the issue quickly and respectfully. Carnegie suggests that effective leaders will begin such discussions with appreciation, and frames issues as easy to resolve to avoid resentment.

Second, it’s critical to reflect on one’s role in the conflict. Even if a teammate is at fault, I assess whether I have enabled the problem. This approach was reinforced by a class case study, which showed how addressing a “slacker” in the group requires the team to examine how their actions allowed the behavior to persist (Mayo, Margolis, & Gallo, 2020). After reading this case in CS 177, I gave a “slacking” teammate more grace, understanding I had enabled behavior. Acknowledging my mistakes allows others to save face, preserving team relationships going forward.

Finally, I remind myself to avoid assuming intentions. The fundamental attribution error—“When we are in conflict, we tend to attribute it to the other person's character flaws. For ourselves, we tend to attribute it to the situation” (The Neuroscience of Conflict and Its Impact on Workforce, 2022)—can cloud judgment. This principle is my personal favorite, as my mom emphasized the importance of perspective throughout childhood. Understanding someone’s perspective means refraining from assuming poor intentions, and instead articulating how their actions have made others feel and affected the group.

My manager at Alpine flawlessly used these principles to change my behavior. I was late sending materials to a CEO, and my manager addressed the issue directly at our morning standup. He thanked me for the work, then explained that we needed to act quickly with the CEO. He acknowledged that he could have emphasized this urgency in training. The issue was resolved without resentment, and I learned how timely, respectful conflict resolution can improve team dynamics.

Feedback: Confirming Self Perception?

As we learned in class, feedback is a gift that is essential for personal and team development. One of Christina’s students captured this perfectly: “When we ask for feedback from others, it can be scary — because the narrative we have of ourselves might not match the narrative others have about us (Forward, 2016).” Feedback requires deep introspection and a growth mindset towards evolving.

I internalized this lesson firsthand, when midway through the summer, interns on another team received individual feedback from their managers, while I had not. I felt stressed and uncertain, so I reached out to my manager for feedback. This proactive approach helped me identify areas for improvement and strengthened my confidence and contribution to the team.

Group projects in HCI have taught me a lot about design, but also about myself. For example, I received feedback that I have strong design and product management skills but should involve others in the design process. Teammates told me that I excel in keeping the team aligned with deliverables but should ensure my voice is heard. I was also told that when I think deeply, I sometimes go silent and appear disengaged, though I contribute humor and energy to projects. I now use feedback as an opportunity to assess whether my self-perception aligns with how others see me, adjusting my approach based on their insights.

Notably, effective feedback goes beyond critique; it should offer guidance for improvement. Structuring feedback as “improvers” and “keepers” helps teams maintain strong relationships while fostering growth. In my future teamwork, I plan to give and receive feedback with a focus on both strengths and areas for improvement.

Conclusion: Mindset Makes or Breaks

Communication difficulties in teams can be mitigated by establishing clear goals, norms, and roles, and by maintaining a positive mindset. Regular check-ins can prevent conflict, but some conflict is imminent. When resolving issues, team members must reflect on their contributions, avoid assuming intentions, and respect each other’s perspectives. Feedback should be seen as a valuable datapoint about how one is perceived, welcoming it as a means for growth.

The central theme of this essay is that while structure and protocols can help, mindset and self-awareness are paramount when navigating interpersonal dynamics. As Maya Angelou (and my water polo coach) says “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Effective teamwork is about making others feel valued, heard, and empowered, and this can only happen when we bring enthusiasm, understand each other, and approach conflict with respect and empathy.

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