Conversations Essay: Exploring Interpersonal Dynamics in

Professional Environments

Guiding Question: What makes working in teams hard and how do we mitigate these

problems?

Introduction

“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” This

quote from James Clear’s Atomic Habits encapsulates a core truth about both

individual and team dynamics.1 While often understood at a personal

level—highlighting the importance of habits in achieving success—it applies just as

effectively to teams. Teams develop communication, negotiation and feedback habits,

whether through deliberate systems or disorganized patterns, and those habits dictate

their success or failure. In this essay, we will explore strategies that foster effective

communication, methods for navigating negotiation and conflict, and the importance of

constructive feedback in professional settings.

1 Clear, J. (2018). Atomic habits: tiny changes, remarkable results : an easy & proven way to build good

habits & break bad ones. New York, New York, Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

Effective Communication

A team’s communication habits form their basis of collaboration. Positive

communication habits like punctuality and clarity streamline collaboration, while poor

habits, such as lateness and ambiguity, can derail a team's progress.

As such, it is imperative that teams develop strategies to foster effective

communication. While it must be noted that these strategies are highly

context-dependent, there are a few that are useful in most situations. One such

strategy is clear and structured communication, such as meeting agendas and email

formats. In a professional context, structured communication means that team

members express themselves with clarity, avoiding ambiguous or jargon-filled

language that could confuse others. According to an article by Conrad and Poole

(2012), using structured formats such as agendas during meetings and clear subject

lines in emails significantly enhances the productivity of communication.2 This method

ensures that information is transmitted in a manner that is easily digestible and

actionable by the team members, thus minimizing the likelihood of errors and

misinterpretation.

Another effective communication strategy is having regular feedback loops. As noted

by DeNisi and Kluger (2000), providing and receiving feedback consistently allows

2 Conrad, C., Poole, M. S. (2012). Strategic Organizational Communication: In a Global Economy. United

Kingdom: Wiley.

teams to address issues in real time and make necessary adjustments to both

individual and collective performance.3 This continuous optimization of the team

dynamic has compounding effects, resulting in hyper-efficient teams after extended

periods of collaboration.

Effective communication was crucial to our group’s success, reducing uncertainty,

eliminating indecision, and clarifying responsibilities. Early on, we established

communication norms, including the platforms we used and an informal tone, which

streamlined our interactions. We also assigned a “point person” for each deliverable,

giving them decision-making authority and helping maintain momentum. Clear role

assignments ensured accountability and kept us on track to meet deadlines.

However, our communication was not always perfect. One mistake we persistently

made was infrequent, and ineffective, “big picture” thinking. While we communicated

about weekly deliverables effectively, we did not set aside time to strategize for the

month/quarter. This meant that we completed weekly assignments with agreeable

quality and timeliness, but they were not cohesive in working towards a greater goal

(the pitch presentation). As a result, we had built a corpus of high-quality work that we

could not use for the most important part of the project.

3 DeNisi, A. S., & Kluger, A. N. (2000). Feedback effectiveness: Can 360-degree appraisals be improved?

Academy of Management Perspectives, 14(1), 129–139. doi:10.5465/ame.2000.2909845

Personally, there are several ways I can improve my effective communication skills. My

group mentioned that I can improve upon communicating tasks more clearly when I am

the point person for a particular deliverable. In this situation, I think the root cause was

discomfort with being in a position of authority over my classmates, despite everyone

agreeing that it would be helpful. Henceforth, I will leverage this authority effectively for

the entire group by fulfilling the responsibilities it includes without hesitation. Another

piece of feedback that I received was streamlining discussions to keep the group on

track. This makes sense, as I tend to think out loud which often results in unfocused

verbal communication that can be confusing for my teammates. To mitigate this, I will

create a rough mental outline of my thoughts before converting them to speech.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable, especially when diverse perspectives and

expertise converge. However, with effective negotiation and conflict resolution

strategies, teams can transform potential disruptions into opportunities for growth and

innovation.

One key principle in negotiation is integrative bargaining, often referred to as a

"win-win" approach. Rather than focusing solely on competing for resources or

outcomes, integrative bargaining seeks to expand the range of possible solutions by

exploring underlying interests. A study by Thompson, Wang, and Gunia (2010)

emphasizes the importance of this strategy in fostering collaboration, as it encourages

open communication about each party’s goals and interests, allowing for creative

solutions that benefit all involved.4 This approach not only resolves the immediate issue

but also strengthens relationships by showing a commitment to fairness and long-term

cooperation.

Another important strategy is principled negotiation, introduced by Fisher, Ury, and

Patton (1991) in their influential work Getting to Yes. Principled negotiation focuses on

separating people from the problem, ensuring that the issue is addressed without

personal attacks or emotional escalation.5 This method fosters collaboration by

creating a respectful and solution-oriented environment where team members feel safe

sharing their perspectives. Moreover, the use of objective criteria during negotiations

helps avoid unnecessary conflict by grounding decisions in neutral standards rather

than subjective opinions or power dynamics. By relying on data, precedents, or

benchmarks, teams can reach more equitable agreements, which are essential for

maintaining trust and collaboration in a work environment.

Negotiation principles can be leveraged very effectively in the professional world. In

2018, Netflix and Warner Bros. entered high-stakes negotiations over the streaming

rights to Friends. Warner Bros. planned to reclaim the show for their upcoming service,

HBO Max, while Netflix wanted to retain it due to its popularity. Both companies

5 Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (2011). Getting to yes: negotiating agreement without giving in. 3rd ed.,

rev. ed. New York, Penguin.

4 Thompson, L. L., Wang, J., & Gunia, B. C. (2010). Negotiation. Annual Review of Psychology, 61,

491–515. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100458

leveraged their BATNAs (Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement) —Netflix could

focus on growing its original content, while Warner Bros. could boost HBO Max with

Friends. By focusing on interests over positions, they reached a compromise: Netflix

paid $100 million for one more year of streaming rights, giving both sides what they

needed—time and additional revenue.6

A few core principles that are important to me are empathy, transparency, and a focus

on solutions. I believe empathy helps me understand where others are coming from,

allowing me to see the bigger picture in a negotiation and find common ground.

Transparency is essential because it builds trust—I’ve found that when I’m honest

about my limitations or needs, it encourages others to be upfront as well, which makes

resolving conflicts much smoother. Lastly, keeping a problem-solving mindset helps

me avoid getting stuck in the emotions of a disagreement, focusing instead on how to

move forward and create win-win outcomes for everyone involved.

Feedback Insights

Feedback plays a pivotal role in shaping interpersonal dynamics, acting as a tool for

both individual growth and relationship development. Within teams, effective feedback

helps cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and mutual respect. As Stone and

Heen (2014) argue in Thanks for the Feedback, the key to impactful feedback lies in its

6 Adalian, J. (2018). Why Netflix Spent $80 Million to Keep Friends for Another Year. Retrieved from

https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/netflix-friends-2019-streaming-deal.html

delivery and reception.7 Feedback that is clear, actionable, and focused on behaviors

rather than personal characteristics allows individuals to take it constructively,

promoting self-improvement without damaging relationships. This type of feedback

helps team members reflect on their actions and adjust their behavior in a positive way.

Similarly, DeNisi and Kluger (2000) emphasize that feedback enhances both

performance and team dynamics when it is delivered in a respectful and timely manner.

By clarifying expectations and addressing issues before they escalate, feedback

reduces uncertainty and fosters trust within the group. However, poorly delivered

feedback—when it feels overly critical or vague—can strain relationships, create

defensiveness, and hinder collaboration. For feedback to strengthen interpersonal

dynamics, it needs to be framed in a way that encourages growth while maintaining the

trust and respect that are essential to effective teamwork.

Seeking and receiving feedback has been crucial in my personal and professional

growth because it has shown me my strengths and weaknesses, plus honed my

empathy by giving me a sharper understanding of how my actions affect others in

different situations. In this class, receiving feedback from my group has helped me

identify areas of improvement in my verbal communication, such as brevity, as well as

leadership skills such as delegation that I can further develop.

7 Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2014). Thanks for the feedback: the science and art of receiving feedback well

(even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you're not in the mood). New York, New

York, Viking.

Based on my experiences, there are a few useful guidelines for giving and receiving

feedback gracefully. When giving feedback, focus on specific behaviors rather than

personal attributes. For example, instead of saying, “You’re always late,” say, “I’ve

noticed you’ve been late to meetings, and it’s affecting our timelines. How can we

address this?” This makes the feedback actionable and less personal. Additionally, be

clear and offer concrete suggestions for improvement, such as “Summarizing your

points more concisely in meetings could help keep discussions on track.” When

receiving feedback, listen openly without becoming defensive. Ask clarifying questions

like, “What improvements would you suggest?” to show receptiveness. Finally, express

appreciation by saying something like, “Thank you for the feedback, I’ll consider how

to implement this,” which fosters a positive feedback culture.

Conclusion and Reflection

In conclusion, effective communication, negotiation, and feedback are key to teamwork

and professional success. Clear systems minimize delays, interest-based negotiation

fosters collaboration, and constructive feedback drives continuous improvement. By

adopting these practices, teams can transform conflicts into growth opportunities,

paving the way for sustained progress and shared success.

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