Teams and Communication

Growing up, sports were a core part of my life. I joined soccer and baseball

teams shortly after learning to walk, and by the time I was twelve, I discovered the

sport I’d fall in love with—volleyball. Over the next decade, volleyball would remain a

constant in my life. I played on dozens of teams, from a 6th grade coed team to

representing the United States at the U19 World Championships and finally here at

Stanford. I learned a great deal about life and volleyball during this time, but one thing

in particular sticks out above the rest. Every coach I ever played for instilled in me the

value of effective and transparent communication. In fact, as I’ve grown older, I can see

that this lesson spreads far beyond the volleyball court, and across all mediums and

functions, all teams fundamentally rely on the same thing to operate—reliable and

effective communication. In this essay, we will explore the nuances specifically of

professional, inter-team communication, broken down into three separate categories—

effective communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, and feedback

mechanisms. By examining these elements, we’ll see how mastering the art of

communication not only strengthens team dynamics but also empowers individuals to

navigate complex challenges with confidence and clarity.

To fully understand why e ffective communication is so vital to the successful

operation of cohesive teams, we must first understand why teams are a powerful tool

in the first place. Although it is obvious that a large group of people working together to

achieve a common objective will be far more effective than a single person doing so,

the idea of a “common objective" itself is not insignificant. Without effective

communication, it is impossible to orient a team in the right direction, allowing them to

work together and achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts. With that being

said, I would argue that efficacy fundamentally is based on honesty. This relates

directly to our case study, “Give Your Colleague the Rating He Deserves—or the One

He Wants?” In this case study, the authors explore a situation in which one member of

a team (Mark) falls behind considerably on their work and yet expects positive reviews

from his teammates. Mark’s teammates, Nisha and Ben, show moments of both

effective and ineffective communication. Initially, they allow themselves to become

frustrated without directly addressing the issue. They confront Mark lightly but allow

him to talk his way out of the situation (Mayo et al., 2020). This is understandable, as

they want to be polite, especially in a professional workplace, but in order to be able to

communicate effectively, honesty is paramount. This is something I personally struggle

with to this day, especially with people I don’t know particularly well. I currently work

with a startup, which has put me in a position where I need to give feedback to

designers and engineers about their work that isn’t always overwhelmingly positive. It

has been an area of focus for me to be clear and direct when I am not happy with work

presented to me, because no matter how difficult it may be to say in the moment, it is

absolutely necessary for the long-term success of our team. This is also a two-way

street, where people receiving feedback have to be willing to leave their egos at the

door, but I will discuss this in more detail later in this paper. In the end, effective

communication is not just about exchanging words but about fostering an environment

of honesty and trust, where every team member feels aligned and capable of

contributing their best, even when the conversations may get slightly uncomfortable.

Negotiation and con flict resolution skills are essential for operating in teams

effectively. There has to be a balance of power, sharing of responsibilities, and sharing

of blame and rewards. All of these situations and more are causes for conflict between

team members, where the way in which they are handled can make or break the

success of a team. When conflict inevitably arises, it’s critical that team members

approach it with a mindset geared toward understanding and collaboration rather than

defensiveness. Effective negotiation allows individuals to voice their concerns and

advocate for their needs, while conflict resolution provides a pathway to address those

concerns constructively. In an article for HBS Online, Catherine Cote identifies five key

conflict resolution strategies: avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising,

and collaborating(5 Strategies for Conflict Resolution in the Workplace, 2023). These

are each useful in their own contexts, with varying efficacy depending on the

importance of your goal and the relationships you have with the rest of the team. One

area I find myself disagreeing with Cote is surrounding the efficacy of competition. She

claims both that “this conflict style [competing] is for scenarios in which you place high

importance on your goal and low importance on your relationships with others. It’s high

in assertiveness and low in cooperation” and “When using a competing style in

situations where your relationships do matter (for instance, with a colleague), you risk

impeding trust—along with collaboration, creativity, and productivity” (5 Strategies for

Conflict Resolution in the Workplace, 2023). As I previously mentioned, I have a

somewhat substantial background in sport, and I believe that contrary to what was

previously stated, competition can be highly effective as long as ego is not involved.

Putting ideas head to head and allowing them to be fleshed out and compared is the

ultimate form of conflict resolution if team members can separate themselves from their

ideas and allow themselves to be vulnerable in this way. Without an emotional

attachment to your own ideas, competition is not only effective, but I would argue it is

the purest form of conflict resolution. This all funnels back to what I would consider

one of my core principles, honesty. Without honesty, productive conflict resolution is

nearly impossible, and while deceit may seem like a fast solution to make your own

ideas “win”, it comes at the expense of the success of the team.

Finally, giving and receiving feedback is an absolutely vital process for teams to

function well. As people work together over time, they become aware of one another’s

strengths and weaknesses, and when it is appropriate, bringing these to the attention

of your teammates is an extremely beneficial exercise. Both allowing others to give

feedback to you as well as giving others feedback when it would be valuable are

characteristics I would attribute to a great teammate. I have always been one to desire

feedback. I want people to tell me if they aren’t happy with how I’m performing, or even

if they see something that they think maybe I don’t. One of the most interesting and

related performance evaluations I have received was at the midpoint of my summer

internship, two years ago. I was working as a product management intern at Spectrum

Mobile, and the PM that I was working for told me to think about our team exactly as

that, a team. She told me that I was too unwilling to have necessary conversations

because I was trying to be overly friendly with everyone and reminded me that

everyone around me was a professional adult, and it was frankly disrespectful to treat

them as anything else. This really informed the way I thought about teamwork moving

forward, because while it is absolutely positive to have friendly relationships with

everyone you work with, it is far more important to have a mutual respect and

understanding that you are both doing what you believe is best for the success of your

product and your team. Only when that is mutually understood are you able to truly

have beneficial discourse.

In summary, the lessons I've gained from years of professional teamwork and

athletic competition all point to one fundamental idea: effective communication is the

cornerstone of any successful team. Teams may function with unity and purpose when

there is effective communication, whether it is through honest criticism, clear

instructions, or constructive conflict resolution. From volleyball courts to startup

meetings, my experience has taught me that although tactics and abilities differ

depending on the situation, open, courteous, and straightforward communication is

always crucial. An atmosphere of trust and shared purpose is produced when team

members are prepared to have open discussions, face difficult realities, and put the

success of the group ahead of their own egos. I'll keep these lessons in mind as I

advance in my career, understanding that effective communication is about laying the

groundwork for long-term cooperation and respect rather than merely accomplishing

particular objectives. Ultimately, communication is what turns a collection of people

into a team that can accomplish more than they could ever do separately; it is not just

a tool for success.

Works Cited

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