In workplaces, individuals from diverse backgrounds gather and work towards a collection of

goals, defined through top-down or bottom-up approaches. While diversity is usually considered

to be a strength for more robust success, it can also become counter-productive as it introduces

interpersonal challenges within the team. Conflicts may arise from competing priorities,

communication barriers, or different problem-solving mindsets. Managing interpersonal dynamics

can be daunting because of its delicate nature of dealing with emotions and the case-by-case

nuances. However, systematic understanding of communication skills, negotiation and conflict

resolution strategies, and feedback mechanisms can help individuals as well as team leaders to

identify the best practices to build an effective team.

Let’s start with a hypothetical scenario. Two people are writing an op-ed. The two individuals have

agreed on the deadlines for the first draft where they work on separate sections. However, this is

their first time working together and they do not know that they prefer different working styles.

Person A prefers to have constant check-ins between deadlines, sharing resources and insights

synchronistically. Person B prefers to check in at the given milestone for more focused discussions.

B finds responding to A’s constant messages overwhelming, while A gets concerned over B’s lack

of updates and worries that they are not on the same page. Tensions begin to build, potentially

influencing the quality of this collaborative project.

While this scenario doesn’t cause a serious breakdown, it highlights an often-overlooked

communication tactic: proactive communication. The concept consists of anticipation of potential

concerns, preparations of responses in advance, consistent engagement, and high information

transparency.1 Retrospecting on the class activity where we compared individual work styles and

crafted team norms, it is a good opportunity to navigate through individual differences and find

the most effective ways of leveraging everyone’s advantages and recognizing where additional

accommodations can improve collective effectiveness. By setting expectations on meeting

frequencies, preferred channels of updates, and how we handle disagreements, our team has set a

strong foundation for collaboration, preventing misunderstanding and ensuring that everyone feels

aligned.

Proactive communication is not only about the content that we share, but also about how we

reinforce these best practices. Effective measures include clarification questions, fostering the

space for active listening, and positive reinforcement to encourage open dialogue. The openness

of sharing begins with being better listeners ourselves.2 By understanding each other's perspectives

and building the common ground, we create a professional environment that promotes trust and

respect, and therefore, transparency and collaboration.

Going back to the example, if A and B had discussed their preferred working styles and set clear

expectations around communication in advance, they might have avoided the tension. They would

have fostered more mutual trust through the communication, reducing misunderstandings of

intentions and creating a workflow where everyone’s preferences can be supported.

Personally, I am closer to person B in sticking to original check-in schedules. However, through

the course of working with my team, I have come to realize that it is important to sync up with

small progress, especially for a highly volatile and interconnected workflow like product

management. Inspirations can come unexpectedly and it is important to capture and share these

ideas in real-time to ensure that efforts are aligned and resources are directed toward the same

objective. Moreover, while independent deliberation is important, running new ideas with your

teammates before materializing them can benefit from incorporating constructive feedback more

effectively.

Despite having effective communication, facing conflicts within a team is inevitable. Unresolved

conflicts bear considerable financial cost, amounting to $359 billion for American businesses

yearly.3 Katherine Shonk identified three root causes of conflicts within the workplace: task,

relationship, and value.4 Task-based conflicts tend to be less personal, involving dividing up

resources, managing priorities, and mediating among competing problem-solving approaches.

Relationship conflicts result from personality clashes. Value conflicts are the most challenging, as

they often go beyond the immediate workplace setting and involve deeply held beliefs and moral

principles.

Tackling conflicts requires tailored strategies. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model seeks to

combine and balance assertiveness and cooperativeness based on the relative importance of

relationship and personal goals.5 If maintaining the relationship is more paramount, one should

adopt a strategy that is more cooperative. Conversely, if your personal goal is a priority, self-

assertiveness should take precedence.

In “An Office Romance Gone Wrong,” Elizabeth faces two-fold challenges.6 On one hand, she

faces relationship conflicts with Brad, her past office romance, and Claudia, his fiancée-to-be and

her mentee-to-be. On the other hand, she grapples with relationship and value conflicts with her

boss, who is dismissive of Elizabeth’s perspectives on professionalism and respect. In this case,

both of her personal goals of professional growth and reputation and her professional relationships

are relatively high stakes. Therefore, the model suggests that she pursue a strategy that highlights

both assertiveness and cooperativeness.

In addressing her manager, she should initiate the conversation regarding her long-term growth

potential within the organization based on her unique contributions. This could clarify role-sharing

with Claudia, open new avenues for meaningful contributions, and underscore her commitment to

the ongoing success of the company. The transparency and alignment with the company’s growth

will fortunately encourage the supervisor to appreciate her professional values, better positioning

him to support her needs while fostering team harmony and robustness.

With the couple, I would advise Elizabeth to initiate the conversation with them at the same time

and frame it in a constructive way that would highlight her commitment to maintain

professionalism and to be a better mentor for Claudia. While this might feel like swallowing her

pride, I choose to see it as an opportunity for Elizabeth to proactively assert her boundaries. By

suggesting a common direction to work towards together, Elizabeth can avoid the past mistakes of

engaging in emotionally charged interactions focusing on immediate frustrations. Additionally,

proactively resolving the conflict can reassert her leadership that prioritizes harmony and success.

Personally, I find the collaboration strategy with open conversation to be particularly effective.

From class discussions and readings, I have learned to assert my positions while acting in a

collaborative way. Open-minded conversations with conflicting parties may reveal unexpected

commonalities, and innovative and collaborative solutions. Framing the conversation towards a

common and meaningful goal encourages everyone to be more invested in understanding,

respecting, and collaborating, rather than defensive emotions.

Lastly, active feedback loops are key to maintaining healthy dynamics within the team, fostering

the atmosphere of respectful communication while reducing heated confrontations before they

escalate. Regular feedback should balance acknowledgement of positive contributions and

constructive suggestions on where to improve. This not only benefits team cohesion as each

member gains a clearer understanding of the roles of themselves and other team members within

the group, but also supports individual growth by providing timely recognition and actionable

suggestions.

For our team project, I appreciate the midterm feedback as it gives us an opportunity to both receive

and issue feedback. This helps me to further contemplate what a good team dynamic would look

like and compare my own performance to my arguments. Moreover, receiving recognition

encourages me to further pursue certain strategies for my contribution, and since the suggestions

are framed as actionable steps rather than criticism, it feels mentally more relieving to incorporate

them into later collaboration. Moreover, the impact of such feedback generalizes towards future

career endeavors as I have a more solid understanding of what I should do more in a team, and

where I should pivot my approaches.

From personal experiences and “Give Your Colleague the Rating He Deserves—or the One He

Wants?”, I have summarized the following principles to give constructive feedback.

● Timeliness: Especially during early stages of collaboration when people are less familiar

with each other, regular check-ins are crucial for establishing a baseline understanding of

expectations and evaluations, preventing future friction.

● Specificity: Feedback should derive from detailed observations of performance and impact,

instead of general traits. This is helpful for the person who receives the feedback to

introduce concrete changes. For example, in the case study, Nisha could have specified her

concerns to Ben by highlighting his missed deadlines and the impact on the delivery,

making it easier for Ben to understand the issue without feeling personally attacked.

● Constructive Framing: While sometimes negative feedback come from difficult emotions,

it is always important to frame feedback as opportunities for improvement. This can make

the recipient less defensive and clarify where to direct efforts. For example, Nisha could

have asked Ben “How can we work together to prevent this in the future?” to signal a

willingness to support the recipient’s growth through feedback, rather than picking faults.7

In conclusion, proactively communicating expectations and preferences, addressing conflicts

through open dialogues and collaboration mindsets, as well as giving timely, specific, and

constructive feedback are indispensable in creating a respectful and robust work environment.

Humans, instead of machines, bring unique perspectives, emotions, and approaches to their roles.

Mastering these interpersonal skills can fortify trust, innovation and collaboration, unleashing

greater potential for both individual and collective success in the workplace. (1496 words)

7 Anthony J. Mayo, Joshua D. Margolis, and Amy Gallo, “Case Study: Give Your Colleague the Rating He

Deserves-or the One He Wants?,” Harvard Business Review, November 6, 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/01/case-study-

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