From Friction to Flow: Unpacking Interpersonal Dynamics in Professional Settings

1. Introduction

Working across global, cross-functional teams has shown me that interpersonal dynamics are

critical in professional environments. Diversity enriches collaboration but also demands a deep

understanding of effective communication, conflict resolution, and feedback. This essay delves

into these essential elements, exploring strategies for building a cohesive, productive environment

that enables both individual and collective growth. Mastering these interpersonal skills enables us

to bridge gaps, leverage diverse insights, and create lasting impact. In the fast-paced,

interconnected world of today’s hybrid workplaces, this discussion is crucial to achieving

sustainable team success.

2. Effective Communication

Communication helps build trust and motivate innovation. Open discussions facilitate honest

communication and reduce unspoken resentments, minimizing assumptions and

misunderstandings and creating a more transparent and cooperative working environment.

Effective Communication

encourages honest dialogue and reveals underlying concerns that might otherwise remain

unspoken2.

• Right Questions: Clarifying, adjoining, funneling, and elevating questions guided our

team meetings.

• Cultural Sensitivity: In “Follow Dubious Orders or Speak Up3”, Susan, an intern working

remotely for Seoul office, faced an ethical conflict when her manager, Mr. Moon, asked

her to gather competitor information without disclosing her affiliation with the company.

Susan recognized that directly confronting her manager might be inappropriate in Korean

business culture. She actively listened to Mr. Moon’s explanation instead of refusing

directly, then escalated her concerns to Emma, the head of the intern program.

• Collaborative tools:

o Our team created a priority-based task document. This workspace made progress

visible and accessible to everyone. Notion workspace is also efficient for managing

team workflows.

o We had a good time using MURAL during class. It provided digital whiteboards

that are perfect for brainstorming sessions, mapping ideas, and visually organizing

information.

o I also use Trello for task prioritization and visual management. It provides clarity,

and accountability, which ensure everyone remains on the same page.

Ineffective Communication

• As a diverse team, conflicting schedules and last-minute changes hindered our

productivity. We scheduled meetings and allowed team members to suggest alternative

times. Thanks to Mina, she introduced “When2Meet4” to determine a mutually

convenient time. We also realized it would be more efficient to plan recurring meetings

at a fixed time from Week1 to reduce repeated time coordination.

• iMessage sometimes led to delayed responses. Adopting a tool with acknowledgment

features, like Slack’s reactions, could ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Based on the feedback I received; I can practice more assertive communication. I will speak up to

ensure my ideas are heard and contribute effectively to the team. Although I often bring new ideas,

there have been instances where my suggestions have veered off-topic. Given that our group has

undergone several shifts, it is essential to take meeting notes and stay aligned with our latest

decisions and priorities.

3. Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

• Clarity and Transparency: In the “How to Rate a Colleague5” case, Nisha directly

addressed her concerns with Ben regarding his missed deadlines and clearly expressed her

expectations. Nisha kept her comments centered on his work performance rather than

personal criticisms. Open dialogue and feedback reduced the risk of “social loafing”—

where unclear responsibilities can lead to disengagement. In “Protecting the Cheddar6”,

Sara openly questioned why critical systems were accessible online. She brought attention

to overlooked vulnerabilities and enhanced security measures.

• Flexibility and Adaptability: In the case “Can One Business Unit Have Two Revenue

Models?”, Scherr Pharmaceuticals ultimately decided to allow both revenue models to

coexist rather than forcing a merger of approaches. The company helped both departments

move past their individual conflicts, which fostered alignment and collaboration.

• Focus on Shared Goals: Shared goals shift the focus from individual ownership to team

success. Team members feel less territorial and more open to exchanging insights and

resources. In a nonprofit example7, instead of each product owner feeling protective over

their own projects, they began to see their work as part of a bigger mission.

In our GoodWalks project, we encountered disagreements around defining our target user persona,

deciding whether to sell insoles, shoes, or licenses, and narrowing down the type of shoes (heels

or casual usages) to focus on.

• Scientific Analysis Tools: We conducted value proposition analysis and early market

validation to confirm user needs and avoid personal biases. We also used Emotional

Journey Map, the Business Model Canvas to find a unified strategic direction.

• Narrow Down: We selected specific use scenarios to reduce overly broad discussions and

avoid spending time on unrelated topics.

• Empathy in Conversations: Our team members are thoughtful and inclusive. We often

ask, “How do you feel about that?” to encourage reflection and disagreement, thereby

enriching deliberation. Decisions become more well-rounded and representative of the

team’s collective input.

With my multicultural background, I rely on clarity, empathy, and adaptability in negotiation and

conflict resolution. I've learned different communication styles from different cultural

backgrounds. This was particularly valuable when I worked as an interpreter, where even subtle

cultural nuances could impact how objectives were interpreted.

4. Feedback Insights

Feedback sits at the intersection of the drive to improve and the desire for acceptance8. Feedback

involves three “realities” — the feedback giver’s perspective, the observed behavior, and the

recipient's reactions. Since each person holds only two of these, feedback fills in the missing third

reality, making it a “gift” that reveals insights and reduces misunderstandings9.

Feedback helps me understand how I impact others and how I can perform better. During my

internship, I used Jira to receive ongoing feedback through task tracking. This not only organized

workflows but also fostered a proactive approach to project adjustments.

To give and receive feedback gracefully:

• Timeliness: Agile development exchanges feedback frequently through short-cycle

iterations and reviews, such as daily stand-ups and sprint retrospectives, to prevent issues

from accumulating.

• Ask Permission to Give Feedback

• Specificity: Feedback acts like an “ uncoupled device11” . Therefore, describe what was

done rather than labeling someone’s personality or intentions12. Instead of saying, “You’re

disorganized,” say, “It would help if you could review the checklist before submitting.”

• An Open, Safe Environment: Like what we did in class, everyone is asked to share one

positive observation and one area for improvement, helping reduce defensiveness. We feel

safe and prepared to share and receive feedback.

• Avoid the “Feedback Sandwich”: Dilute critique by sandwiching it between

compliments can seem insincere and confuse the message. Instead, keep praise and

criticism separate.

From my experiences in Amazon and Microsoft’s cross-functional, multinational teams, I have

seen the role of interpersonal dynamics in professional success. This essay highlights key insights

into effective communication, conflict resolution, and the constructive use of feedback. In the

global tech environments I've worked in, these skills prove invaluable. They enable teams to

harness varied perspectives and leverage them for innovative solutions, ultimately creating a more

adaptable work environment. Mastering these interpersonal dynamics equips us to navigate

complex global settings effectively, paving the way for meaningful impact and sustainable success

in any professional context.

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