Exploring Interpersonal Dynamics in Professional Settings

As we have discussed in class, managing intrapersonal dynamics is one of the most challenging and critical aspects of product management. While it is easy to assume that one can simply apply their standard social skills to professional environments to effectively manage teams, history suggests that working in teams is more challenging, and requires a more specific skill set, than people expect. As such, successful product management requires a thoughtful understanding of interpersonal dynamics and how they can both help and hinder teams seeking to achieve business goals.

Effective communication is an essential piece of professional teamwork. However, despite agreement on the importance of effective communication, teams often go wrong by blindly assuming that all team members share a definition of what effective communication looks like. With each member biased by their individual expectations, teams who fail to set guidelines for communication and to proactively align their expectations set themselves up for miscommunication, resentment, and failure to achieve their goals. As such, when embarking on a project, teams must set intentional norms about how they will communicate and what they are trying to achieve. While norms should be tailored to the unique qualities of the team and needs of the project, there are core pillars that all team norms should incorporate. As will be discussed in more detail throughout the remainder of this paper, the following high-level norms are essential to managing interpersonal dynamics:

To keep teams collaborative and ensure that all perspectives are considered, ensure that all team members feel that they have the space to equally contribute.

Moments of conflict are inevitable; rather than shying away from conflict, use it as an opportunity to better understand the project’s constraints and the needs of stakeholders.

Create regular opportunities for feedback and ensure that feedback is tied to business objectives. Give team members grace as they absorb and implement feedback.

Effective communication requires creating space for diverse perspectives

At a fundamental level, successful communication relies on each team member feeling like they have the opportunity to contribute and that their contributions are valued. While most team members would agree that this is important, in practice, the personalities of team members can undermine this norm. Personally, one of my communication shortcomings is that, in group settings, I tend to be a vocal, and at times, dominating leader. I am often very quick to make decisions, and can, in my haste, fail to truly evaluate alternative conclusions that do not align with my instincts. Although it has never been my intention to undermine my team, I recognize that these traits can cause my team to function more like a work group than a true team, with other teammates feeling as if they do not have room to contribute. This, in turn, makes them less invested in the project and can reinforce my feeling that I must make decisions alone. In order to address this problem, in my team this quarter, I have tried to ensure that, any time my team meets, I ask two to three questions about what my teammates think we should do before offering my opinion. In doing so, I hope to ensure that our evaluation of alternative ideas is not swayed by my typically decisive opinions and that I make space for others to share their opinions. After having implemented this change, I have noticed that quieter members of the group have been more likely to contribute to the conversation and, in turn, have seemed more invested in the final output. I have also found that I feel less stressed; since my teammates seem more invested during our meetings, I find it easier to trust that they will follow through on their work. As this example suggests, product managers can support effective communication by reminding each team member to reflect on how their leadership style impacts others’ ability to contribute to the conversation.

Approach conflict as a means to better understand the project.

Given that resources will always be limited and different stakeholders will have different priorities, conflict is inevitable in professional settings. However, rather than shying away from conflict or trying to ignore it, effective product managers can lean into conflict, and use it as a means to recenter the team around their objectives, rather than derail the project. As Liane Davey describes in her article “The Conflict Resolution Skills Every Project Manager Needs,” product managers should not think of their role as that of peacekeepers who try to squash conflict, but rather as conflict managers, who dig into conflicts to investigate how to better understand the project (Davey). For example, a product manager could reframe a conflict over which feature to prioritize when developing a product roadmap by asking each stakeholder to list their priorities for the project and describe how their proposed order of the rollout connects to their priorities. Once they understand where each party in the conflict is coming from, the team can recenter by seeking to understand how and why different team’s priorities are diverging. By using moments of conflict to illuminate differences in perspective, the team can ultimately use conflict as a way to understand the project more deeply and better achieve business goals. Beyond just this, keeping the conversation focused on business objectives, rather than the qualities of each team member, can help ensure that teammates avoid conflict that becomes personal and undermines their ability to work together.

Maximize the effect of feedback by connecting it to objective facts about behavior

Lastly, feedback is a critical aspect of effective communication and managing the interpersonal dynamics on teams. However, despite its importance, learning how to take feedback can be incredibly challenging, especially for young professionals. Over the summer, I read Meg Jay’s The Defining Decade, a book on the psychology of being in your twenties. One theme of professional development she discusses is that, given how slowly the frontal lobe develops, it can be challenging for twenty-somethings to separate emotional instincts from objective knowledge about a professional situation when receiving feedback. For example, if a boss gives constructive, but slightly negative feedback, a twenty-something is more likely than an older adult to interpret the feedback as a sign that their boss does not like them. As such, it is often hard for young professionals to understand that negative feedback is not intended to be personal, but rather a direct reflection of their professional performance. One strategy for overcoming this that the book offers young professionals is to create two lists whenever they feel emotional about receiving feedback. On the first, they should write the objective facts of the situation and, on the other, they should write out how they feel about the situation. Seeing the lists side by side helps them untwine the objective facts and emotional impact of receiving feedback (Jay).

In this course, I’ve found that this strategy can be particularly useful. During our last round of team feedback, I received feedback that I had broken a team norm by completing another group member’s task for them when they had made an error, rather than informing them and waiting for them to fix it. When I first read this feedback, I was frustrated because the teammate hadn’t been doing their fair share of work and I felt that my desire to produce a good project was not being valued by my teammates. However, after I listed a few objective facts, for example, that my teammates were required to give me feedback and were not angry with me, or that our norms had been to let others do their assigned work and I had, in fact, broken this norm. After completing the exercise, I was able to approach the situation more rationally and absorb the feedback less emotionally. Since then, I have been able to better respect this team norm. It is important to note that a key prerequisite for being able to use this strategy is having concrete information about how one’s behavior led to the feedback they are receiving and undermined the objectives of the team. One way that product managers can support team members' ability to use this strategy and ensure that feedback is interpreted constructively is by avoiding “peer spear” (Mayo) feedback mechanisms that give only numerical ratings, without details that allow a person to understand their ratings. As described by both experts in the Ratings case study and reinforced by Jay’s list strategy, using feedback mechanisms that contextualize feedback with concrete facts about a team member’s behavior are often more effective.

In sum, product managers play an essential role in ensuring that their teams can communicate effectively. By creating norms that encourage collaboration, lean into conflict, and create mechanisms for feedback that inspire true behavior change, product managers can combat many of the inherent challenges of working in a team. By proactively managing intrapersonal dynamics, product managers can set teams up to more effectively work as a team and achieve their business goals.

Works Cited

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