Why is Working in Teams Difficult?

Introduction: The Importance of Communication

For thousands of years, humans have asked ourselves: how did we come out on top? We, without

the enormous stature of elephants, the extreme speed of cheetahs, the multiple stomachs of cows, or the

drought-invincibility of cactuses? Our bones are fragile, we have to eat (a lot) to live, we get burned by

the sun and frozen by the wind and we even rely on shoes to walk around outside. Yet– we have taken

over the world. We’ve driven animals to extinction, domesticated a few others, and invented technology

that can do our thinking for us. How did this happen? Have we defied evolution?

"The answer may lie in our ability to collaborate. In Culture and the Evolution of Human

Cooperation, Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson highlight our evolutionary advantage in cooperating,

learning from one another, and preserving shared knowledge over time (Boyd and Richerson 3281).

Teamwork—ranging from four-person surgical teams to billion-person democracies—has been our

superpower. Every major contribution to our economy, from inventions to global companies, was

accomplished by a team."

Effective teamwork is crucial, but we’re often hampered by individualistic thinking and many

potential pitfalls. This essay explores three essential elements of teamwork: effective communication,

negotiation and conflict resolution, and feedback. Through case studies and personal reflections, I will

discuss approaches to fostering smoother team dynamics."

Part 1: Effective Communication:

We are not the first species to function in teams. Wolves live and hunt in packs, dividing up work,

sharing food, and caring for each other. But what makes our teams so effective is our ability to use

language to synchronize effort. Without effective use of language to communicate amongst our teams, we

fall short in using this collective superpower we possess. In the shortest possible terms, effective

communication provides the clarity necessary to keep teams afloat. Clarity, in this sense, can come in

different forms. Communication is useful in helping groups lay out clear goals, allowing for constant

evaluation of progress toward these goals. Communication also allows for clarity in delegating– allowing

groups to tackle complex and hefty workloads. Without clarity in these regards, team members may

accidentally overlap in work, wasting time – or contradict and undermine each other in progress made

toward an end goal. Communication can provide clarity about when expectations are unmet or exceeded,

and set a plan for how to improve next time.

In 'An Office Romance Gone Wrong,' poor communication and vague feedback lead to frustration

within a team. Elizabeth’s relationship with Brad becomes a source of tension due to indirect feedback

from her manager, leaving her unclear about workplace expectations (Bearden 109). This

miscommunication highlights how unclear communication can undermine team dynamics and amplify

frustration. Well-functioning teams make decisions efficiently and with clarity– and groups need to make

use of effective communication every time.

Ineffective communication in groups can pop up in many ways. Imbalance in communication on

the speaking side is often a culprit– A group project from sophomore year of college where one student

spammed the group chat and another had a seemingly perma-dead phone comes to mind. A fix for this is

to have some, even informal, concept of “minutes”-- don’t move on from a discussion until everyone’s

voice has been heard. On the listening side, it is the responsibility of the entire group to ensure that

everyone’s voice is equally listened to. This pitfall has implications in equity at large– A 2017 study at the

University of Delaware found that women are less likely to be acknowledged when speaking out in a

work context (University of Delaware). I believe in a zero-tolerance policy for interrupting people while

speaking– and that group members must be willing to hold each other accountable for this.

Above all, everyone communicates in different ways. SNHU cites four primary communication

styles (Southern New Hampshire University), and other psychology sources posit that more variation

might exist (DS Psychology Group). I am a lifelong people pleaser, and I have repeatedly received

feedback that this dampens my ability to communicate honestly and effectively. I strive to override the

impulse to avoid communicating difficult ideas and speak my mind when necessary, but this is a lifelong

process. Because of this, I know that the only way to communicate well is to communicate early on– in

every effective team I have been a part of, setting group norms before diving into work has been a saving

grace. Norms prevent ambiguity from escalating into frustration.

Part 2: Negotiation/Conflict Resolution:

In the first line of “Anna Kerenina”, Tolstoy famously writes: “All happy families are alike; each

unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Tolstoy 1)” Professional teams certainly don’t possess the

close personal nature of family relationships– but the essence of the concept: that interpersonal dynamics

fail uniquely and succeed uniformly, is useful.

Conflict is frequent and inevitable, and no conflict is without nuance. Thus, I will argue that the

most vital and least-practiced methods in conflict resolution are approaching problems with curiosity,

patience and empathy, rather than with judgment. In an article titled “Curiosity is a Superpower When

Dealing with Conflict,” Danya Rumore, Ph.D., director of the Environmental Dispute Resolution program

at the University of Utah, argues that approaching conflicts with genuine curiosity—defined as "a keen,

careful, and inquisitive interest"—can be transformative. Rumore notes that preconceived assumptions

often hinder conflict resolution, while a curious mindset opens the door to understanding underlying

issues and fostering collaborative problem-solving (Rumore).

In every unresolved conflict I’ve witnessed, at least one person assumed: 1) the conflict was

simple, 2) they fully understood it, and 3) they didn’t need to adjust their stance.

During my junior year, I took a class with mostly group-based deliverables, requiring everyone’s

commitment to meet demanding deadlines. After a few weeks, it became clear one member wasn’t

contributing much. When someone pointed this out, our judgments snowballed, and what began as, “Hey,

what did \*\*\*\*\* do this week?” quickly escalated to labeling them as lazy or indifferent to the group.

Within minutes, we’d all agreed who the “problem” was.

These judgments only increased tension, and our meetings grew more uncomfortable. Realizing

this wasn’t solving anything, I chose to approach the next task with curiosity instead of judgment. I

noticed that without organized delegation, team members spoke over one another, eagerly claiming tasks.

The student we’d labeled “uncommitted” appeared overwhelmed rather than uninterested.

I suggested we slow down and divide tasks more evenly, ensuring everyone could speak up. The

student visibly relaxed and took on their share confidently. By replacing judgment with curiosity, we

unpacked and resolved the conflict.

Part 3: Feedback Insights:

Feedback is important precisely because without it, growth is near-impossible. Quality systems of

feedback are precisely what make working in teams “learning experiences”, and without well-received

and well-offered feedback, people can’t grow in professional environments.

Internships of any kind are often deemed inherently formative and growth-fostering. I argue,

however, that this growth is not inevitable. Without effective feedback, it is entirely possible to go into

and come out of an experience without improving in any way as a team member or contributor.

I worked in the Senate for two summers with nearly identical responsibilities, including

developing written projects, dividing research, and answering phones. Yet, one internship stood out: each

week, our coordinator gathered feedback on our work and took each intern on a ten-minute walk to

discuss it. She delivered feedback seriously and bluntly, making it easy to accept and apply constructively.

These sessions helped me become a better team member and communicator. Effective feedback is

consistent, specific, and fosters reflection over defensiveness, transforming routine tasks into

opportunities for meaningful growth.

Conclusion:

Teams are essential to our power and productivity as a society, as they enable us to tackle

complex challenges and achieve collective goals. Communication is the backbone of this productivity,

allowing us to coordinate effectively and ensure everyone is aligned toward a shared purpose. Conflict is

inevitable, but when managed with empathy and curiosity, it can strengthen team bonds and foster

individual growth; when ignored or poorly handled, it can derail progress and morale. One of the most

valuable forms of communication that supports both conflict resolution and personal development is

feedback. Thoughtfully delivered, feedback provides the structure and specificity needed for team

members to learn from their experiences and continuously improve, making it indispensable to any

thriving, effective team. The strategies, cases and arguments presented in this essay aim to capture and

clarify the delicate art of working well in professional teams.

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