Beyond Fleeting Encounters: Cultivating Trust and Teamwork in the Workplace

I. Introduction

“Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing, only a signal shown and a distant

voice in the darkness.” - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

While this metaphor is most commonly used to describe untapped friendships or

undiscovered romance, it encapsulates the transient and fleeting nature of human connections.

According to industrial-organizational psychologist and data scientist Andrew Naber, around

one-third of the average person’s life is spent at work (Gettysburg College), often surrounded by

the same people every day. Whether an individual is at a small startup or a large tech firm,

building strong connections with coworkers through effective communication, negotiation and

conflict resolution, and openness to feedback is essential. Thus, this essay explores how these

skills enhance professional relationships and workplace dynamics.

II. Anchors of Communication: Setting the Foundation for Team Success

Effective Communication Strategies

Working on the GoodWalk product team, I learned how vital effective communication is

for productive team dynamics. Two strategies I found impactful were conducting cultural gap

analyses and establishing clear procedures for group decisions.

2

Early in the project, our six-person team struggled to reach consensus on two decisions

that would change the course of our pitch: whether to license our technology to large shoe brands

or sell new shoe styles directly to customers. Our meetings often ended in confusion with no

clear direction. To address this, we turned to a Cultural Gap Analysis discussion to better

understand each other’s communication styles and establish a decision-making process. This

exercise revealed three key patterns in our group’s communication preferences: almost all group

members preferred hierarchical leading, consensual deciding, and non-confrontational

disagreeing communication. As a result, teammates struggled to communicate a solid position

without a leader to look to. With many hesitant to take a strong stance, we appointed a team

mediator— a role that I stepped into. Drawing from our Cultural Gap Analysis insights, I

prompted quieter team members to share their expertise and developed a group voting procedure

where everyone had to participate. Finally, we reached consensus on redesigning the notoriously

uncomfortable women’s heel as our main product.

Applying Effective Communication Strategies Across Diverse Settings

However, like high heels, these strategies are not one-size-fits-all. Across various

communication breakdowns, cultural gap analyses are invaluable for establishing effective group

decision approaches. Thus, adapting communication tactics to fit different settings is essential.

Consider, for example, a team facing recurring deadlock as some members may believe

others’ ideas are underdeveloped, while others feel their input is dismissed as overly simplistic.

A cultural gap analysis might reveal a clash between low-context and high-context

communicators: some prefer straightforward messages, while others leave room for

interpretation. To bridge this gap, the team could set ground rules, such as giving each member a

set time to share their views without interruption. During each person’s proposal, others could

3

ask clarifying questions to better understand each idea. A subsequent vote would allow the team

to reach a balanced decision and avoid deadlock.

In another scenario, imagine a team divided over project pacing—some members feel

bogged down by excessive discussions, while others feel their team rushes into execution. The

cultural gap analysis may highlight a discrepancy between concept-first and application-first

team members. To address this, the group may define clear milestones to achieve their overall

product goal while also agreeing to a trial version of the solution early on, balancing the

preference for preparation and flexibility.

Improving My Communication Skills

As my team’s mediator, I realized communication doesn’t end with planning and task

delegation. A significant piece of feedback I received was to hold team members accountable for

their promised deliverables. Moving forward, I understand that effective communication extends

beyond assigning tasks—it also involves fostering accountability. To improve, I plan to take a

proactive approach to monitoring progress, checking in regularly with team members, and gently

reminding them of our timelines. By incorporating accountability into our communication, I can

help ensure projects stay on track, and everyone feels supported in fulfilling their

responsibilities.

III. Breaking the Ice: Building Cohesion through Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable in professional settings, and negotiation is essential when tough

decisions arise. In a Harvard Review case study, Lance Best, CEO of Barker Sports Apparel,

manages an internal conflict between his CFO Damon Ewen and his head of sales Ahmed Lund,

whose differing management styles have led to operational bottlenecks, missed opportunities,

4

and even jeopardized client relationships (Groysberg). Damon, meticulous and fiscally

conservative, sees Ahmed’s approach as reckless and unrestrained, while Ahmed views Damon

as overly controlling.

Interests, Not Positions

As explained by Rodney Jones, Professor in Agricultural Economics at Oklahoma State

University, recognizing shared interests behind opposing positions can foster collaboration. By

identifying common ground, individuals open the door for an open dialogue in which both

parties work towards solving the problem collectively.

In the Barker Sports Apparel case, both party’s conflicting management styles are a

strong source of tension. By identifying shared goals like company growth and customer

satisfaction, CEO Lance could lead them to focus on mutual interests rather than personal styles.

Each party can share how their management style fits the needs of their respective teams and

contribute to their shared interests. By acknowledging their unique contributions, Lance will

encourage respect and a cooperative approach that benefits both departments, laying critical

groundwork for where the rest of the conversation will be built upon.

Invent Options for Mutual Gain

In negotiations, it is equally important to invest options for mutual gains, a strategy

Project Management practitioner Alex Puscasu explains as designing creative solutions that can

satisfy the interests of all parties rather than aiming for a winner-takes-all outcome. By treating

negotiation as a non-zero-sum game, all parties can leave with a solution that meets their needs

and builds a foundation for cooperation.

5

For instance, if Damon and Ahmed were competing over limited resources, they might

agree to a shared resource plan or seek additional funding so both parties can leave with their

needs met. Alternatively, if there is a conflict due to a project deadline, both heads could agree to

break down the project into phases. Thus, deadline-oriented members can present early results,

giving the other department time to refine the final version in later phases.

Core Principles Important to Me

Two key principles I rely on for productive negotiations are making concessions and

staying adaptable. Concessions encourage both sides to compromise on smaller requests, like

adjusting timelines, without compromising core interests, fostering trust and cooperation for

larger agreements. For example, if I were mediating a resource allocation dispute, I would guide

each party to accept minor adjustments that can unlock broader solutions. Adaptability is also

crucial, allowing me to shift strategies if one approach fails. For instance, if arguing over fixed

resources failed, I could break down the request into parts, assessing if certain teams could use

alternative resources or share assets during peak needs. By reframing issues or breaking complex

problems into manageable parts, I encourage innovative perspectives and balanced outcomes.

IV. Course Correction: Feedback Mechanisms as a Tool for Growth

Guiding Your Path: How Feedback Shapes Self-Awareness and Team Dynamics

Feedback plays a crucial role in shaping personal awareness and team-oriented

strategies. For instance, I received feedback to be more open to pivoting from my GoodWalk

team. Growing up in a culturally risk-averse Vietnamese refugee household, I focus on limiting

consequences and tend to stray away from major change. In product roles, being flexible and

open to new ideas—especially in the ideation stage—is just as important as understanding risks

6

and consequences. Integrating this feedback into future product projects, I will develop into a

more flexible PM, leading to stronger performance reviews.

Secondly, feedback can help identify areas for skill development. During my SWE

internship at the Department of Homeland Security, I built an MVP tool for assessing

cybersecurity vulnerabilities in open-source projects. After completing the prototype, I received

feedback from my teammates to communicate my blockers more consistently. Because

independence is emphasized in technical coursework, I tend to isolate myself when working

through challenges. This feedback taught me the importance of collaboration for greater

efficiency, enabling me to work more cohesively in professional team dynamics.

Effective Feedback in Practice: Specificity, Encouragement, and Goal-Setting

To ensure feedback is properly communicated, it should be specific, balanced with

positive reinforcement, and include attainable goals. For instance, during an investment fund

internship, I received general feedback that I should take more advantage of networking

opportunities within the organization. To make the advice more effective, my manager should

have outlined the specific instances of missed opportunities like optional Zoom Lunch and

Learns or cold emailing team members for coffee chats. Additionally, it would have been helpful

to know what practices to continue such as proactively messaging team members. Lastly, as the

recipient of feedback, I should have worked together with my manager to create actionable and

measurable milestones, such as organizing weekly lunches with each team member.

V. Conclusion

In professional environments, where we spend a significant portion of our lives, it’s

essential to transform the fleeting nature of human connections into meaningful relationships.

7

Effective communications strategies like conducting cultural gap analysis and deciding on a clear

procedure can empower your group to productively move forward with decisions. Learning how

to resolve conflict with negotiation strategies can build mutual trust, resolve tension, and foster

stronger professional bonds. Finally, incorporating specific and detailed professional feedback

promotes both personal and team growth. Just as ships can adjust their courses to avoid isolation

in vast waters, colleagues can cultivate a supportive, collaborative work culture that brings

lasting value to both their careers and their connections.

8

Works Cited

Gettysburg College. “One Third of Your Life Is Spent at Work.” Gettysburg College,

www.gettysburg.edu/news/stories?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b.

Accessed 5 Nov. 2024.

Groysberg, Boris, and Katherine Connolly Baden. “Case Study: When Two Leaders on the

Senior Team Hate Each Other.” Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business Review, 18

Oct. 2018,

hbr.org/2018/10/case-study-when-two-leaders-on-the-senior-team-hate-each-other.

Jones, Rodney, et al. “Negotiation Strategies - Oklahoma State University Extension.” OSU

Extension, Oklahoma State University, Aug. 2023,

extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/print-publications/agec/negotiation-strategies-agec-198.

pdf.

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. “The Theologian’s Tale; Elizabeth.” Poets.Org, Academy of

American Poets, 28 June 2019, poets.org/poem/theologians-tale-elizabeth.

Puscasu, Alex. “Negotiation Framework: Mutual Gain and Objective Criteria.” Ape, 20 May

2024, apepm.co.uk/negotiation-framework-mutual-gain-and-objective-criteria/.