Communication, Conflict, and Constructive Feedback: Navigating Team

Dynamics

“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.” I find

that this quote by business magnate Henry Ford aptly captures the essence of teamwork. While

assembling a team may seem straightforward, the true challenge lies in nurturing and sustaining its

development, where members collaborate toward a common goal despite their differences. As the

essay prompt suggests, interpersonal dynamics serve as the glue that binds team members, comprising

three fundamental elements: (1) effective communication, (2) negotiation and conflict resolution, and

(3) feedback mechanisms. This essay will argue that trust forms the foundation for proper

communication, shared “axioms” underpin effective problem-solving, and the integration of

accountability with honesty sustains a stable feedback system.

Effective Communication

When teams need to delegate tasks, assign responsibilities, set timelines, or even coordinate social

engagements like team dinners, effective communication is essential. The core thread that strengthens

such communication is “trust,” defined here as confidence in another’s reliability and authenticity. Trust

can also be described as “the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and

cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms” (Norton). Delegating tasks requires mutual

trust—the belief that team members will fulfill their responsibilities and candidly express their

capacities. When setting deadlines, transparency is key for fair distribution of workload. Whether

leading a project or following another’s lead, my priority is to cultivate trust within the team.

Research consistently underscores the importance of trust and its benefits. High-trust organizations

report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76%

more engagement, 29% greater life satisfaction, and 40% less burnout compared to their low-trust

counterparts (Lewis). Conversely, a lack of trust severely hampers team success. A Forbes survey

revealed that 61% of workers believe their employer’s lack of trust affects their job performance (Kelly).

Poor communication disrupts 42% of cross-functional collaborations, and 39% of employees report

insufficient collaboration within their teams (Clark). These statistics highlight that trust is not just a

desirable trait but an essential pillar that upholds communication, engagement, and overall team

cohesion.

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The significance of trust is exemplified in the OpenAI leadership turmoil of November 2023. In an abrupt

and dramatic series of events, CEO Sam Altman was ousted, President and Chairperson Greg Brockman

was removed from the board, and numerous engineers threatened to resign. Within a single weekend,

the company cycled through multiple leadership changes, provoking outrage from partners, investors,

and the public (Wiggers, 2023). Beneath the surface, the upheaval stemmed from a breakdown of trust

and a lack of “candid communication,” leading to a crisis of governance and mutual suspicion. “It’s a

process of trust collapsing bit by bit, like dominoes falling one by one,” one insider noted (Samuel). The

absence of trust prevented Altman and the board from engaging in open dialogue, ultimately escalating

the situation into public chaos. Had trust been intact, channels of communication would have allowed

for constructive discussions and a peaceful resolution.

In contrast, my CS 177 team showcases how communication rooted in trust can enhance collaboration.

From the moment we were first assigned as a group, we prioritized building rapport. We introduced

ourselves, shared backgrounds, and ensured we sat together in the top left corner of the lecture room.

This physical proximity fostered familiarity and set the stage for convenient interactions. We maintained

consistent updates through a shared WhatsApp group chat, which allowed us to coordinate tasks

effectively with minimal friction. Our communication was so efficient that we could delegate

responsibilities through a few concise texts, enabling us to work autonomously while remaining aligned.

These positive interactions, whether discussing class material or convening for last-minute Zoom calls on

Monday nights, incrementally strengthened our rapport and deepened our understanding of each

other’s work styles. Each touchpoint, from clarifying doubts to refining our assignments, reinforced the

trust we had in one another and facilitated efficient task management without the need for constant

oversight.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable in professional teams due to the diversity of perspectives that fuel innovation but

can also spark disagreements. While my CS 177 team has experienced minimal conflict—if any—past

experiences and future scenarios inevitably bring forth meaningful differences of opinion.

To navigate conflicts effectively, I employ an approach grounded in shared “axioms,” akin to the

foundational principles of Euclidean geometry. Just as mathematicians rely on a set of accepted axioms

to validate proofs, team members must agree on fundamental values to reach logical, objective

conclusions. Without such shared principles, debates devolve into fruitless disputes. Establishing

common ground helps ensure that all parties understand the logic behind differing opinions and can

diagnose any gaps in reasoning. In my experience, resolving conflicts can sometimes feel like

“debugging” a complicated computer program. While this process may take time, it often leads to the

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discovery of shared values and a coalescence around those principles. However, in rare cases where

shared principles cannot be found, or one party fails to understand these foundational ideas, the core

issue often reflects a lack of trust and proper communication—as discussed earlier. Thus, I’ve found that

trust should ideally be established before conflicts or negotiations take place.

But even when parties are aligned on basic principles, their arguments may still diverge and appear

incongruous. One illustrative case is the Week 2 Harvard Business School study involving Isolde and

Emanuel from a newly merged company deciding on its revenue model. Each leader argued for the

model they previously championed, leading to a clash of perspectives. Both proposals had merit and

historical success, making it difficult to choose (Bertini and Tavassoli). This scenario is akin to viewing a

cup from different angles—one side sees a circle, the other a curved rectangle.

The key to resolving such conflicts is to step back, assess the shared “axioms,” and creatively synthesize

these perspectives. Creativity, in this context, involves reframing the situation and finding innovative

solutions that blend or transcend the original proposals. Bodo Eickhoff, a senior vice president at Roche

Diagnostics, argued, “Nothing’s wrong with allowing different revenue models to coexist under one

roof” (Bertini and Tavassoli), emphasizing that hybrid strategies can effectively support overarching

goals and meet diverse needs. Tech investor Eric Achtmann suggested deploying an “independent,

tangential ‘special forces’ unit” to explore unconventional approaches (Bertini and Tavassoli). Eickoff

and Achtmann’s recommendations underscore the role of creative thinking in moving beyond

entrenched positions and fostering adaptability, enabling teams to see a broader picture and identify

previously overlooked opportunities.

Feedback Mechanisms

At its core, feedback acts as a catalyst for both personal and collective growth. Honesty in feedback—

even among friends—should be non-negotiable. Providing insincere praise or avoiding difficult truths

undermines team integrity and hampers development. However, concerns often arise about how

feedback might be received. Will the recipient react negatively or become offended? This is where trust

and shared foundational principles play a pivotal role. When deep mutual trust exists and

communication is open, the recipient can trust that the feedback is given with positive intent, not as a

form of denigration or undue demand. Additionally, when feedback is framed with agreed-upon,

“axiomatic” principles, the recipient can logically understand the rationale, making it easier for them to

process and implement.

This notion is evident in the Week 6 Harvard Business Review case study involving Nisha, Mark, and Ben

at Ness Entertainment. Nisha faced the difficult decision of rating Ben, a friend and colleague who had

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underperformed due to workload challenges, within a peer feedback system. While she empathized

with Ben’s situation, her mentor emphasized the importance of maintaining honesty and transparency

(Mayo et al.), supporting the idea that feedback should reinforce accountability and growth. Dan

Goldenberg, an executive at Activision Blizzard, noted that direct conversations should come before

formal feedback, suggesting, “problems should always be solved at the lowest possible level” (Mayo et

al.). This advice highlights that clear, constructive feedback fosters improvement without damaging

relationships.

My own experience mirrors these lessons. Early in my computer science career as a student, I struggled

to explain complex technical concepts to non-technical audiences, which often led to feedback

indicating that my explanations were too detailed and difficult to follow. This careful feedback pushed

me to engage in exercises focused on concision, such as summarizing intricate topics within two pages,

which greatly improved my ability to communicate effectively and made me more receptive to feedback

as I could see its positive impact on my skills and team collaboration. As I continue with my career, I

strive to apply these insights consistently and encourage others to also embrace feedback as a tool for

growth.

When giving feedback, it is crucial to balance honesty with empathy, ensuring that critiques are paired

with actionable insights. Aiko Bethea's perspective from the HBR case study spotlights this approach,

warning that enabling poor performance weakens team dynamics and advocating for direct, meaningful

feedback. Bethea noted, “Sometimes we give people a pass...but this doesn’t seem to be the case with

Ben” (Mayo et al.), reinforcing the tenet that maintaining integrity in feedback is essential to promoting

trust and sustainable team development.

I believe and have witnessed that adhering to a principle of forthrightness when giving and receiving

feedback breeds resilience and creates a culture where team members feel valued and empowered to

grow. In addition, trusting that feedback is shared with positive intent ensures that teams can navigate

challenges effectively and maintain high standards of collaboration.

Final Thoughts

While these frameworks for communication, negotiation, and feedback are invaluable, challenges and

exceptions will always persist. Trust must be earned, and individuals who act irrationally or refuse to

engage constructively can derail even the most well-intentioned teams. Moreover, feedback, despite

being shared with the best intentions, can sometimes result in misunderstandings or unintended

consequences.

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Recapping my key insights: effective communication is built on trust, negotiation thrives on shared

foundational principles, and feedback must be both honest and empathetic. Mastering these skills

enables team members to handle complex dynamics confidently. While it is impossible to control how

others behave, developing strong interpersonal skills ensures that one can be a dependable and

effective contributor. No framework can account for every situation, as real-world interactions often

resist simple categorization. However, each team’s pursuit of refining these interpersonal dynamics is an

ongoing process that strengthens their collective resilience. Through the dedication of these practices,

teams can transform challenges into opportunities for growth and shared success.

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