You’re Prioritizing the Wrong Skillset

Many modern companies, despite their public messaging, are primarily driven by results.

Netflix was one of the first organizations to openly reveal this focus, releasing a culture slide

deck that proudly celebrated “A-level performance” with higher pay and increased

responsibilities, while addressing “B-level performance” through severance packages

proportional to perceived employee effort (Netflix 35). This results-driven mindset leads many

high-performing STEM undergraduates to pour countless hours into platforms like LeetCode and

HackerRank, but how often do we see these same students intentionally practicing effective

communication, conflict resolution, or feedback in their daily lives? This intense focus on high

performance and technical skills often leaves a gap in the essential soft skills that form the

foundation of any successful team or organization. This essay explores the complex dynamics of

collaboration in professional settings, and it makes the argument that investing in interpersonal

skills serves as a multiplier for success and longevity for both teams and individuals. By

understanding and addressing the gaps in these skills, we can better navigate the challenges of

working in teams and foster more effective, resilient collaboration.

Let’s start with effective communication. While we often discuss love languages in

relationships and friendships, how often do we consider adapting our communication style to

better connect with our coworkers? In professional settings, some people simply want their

contributions acknowledged and validated, while others prioritize efficiency and dislike what

they perceive as performative validation taking up meeting time. Many default to ignoring minor

2

frictions until they smolder, but as LeMay advises in Product Management in Practice, it’s

crucial to “get out ahead of potential miscommunications and misalignments, no matter how

inconsequential they seem in the moment” (Ch 1: Your Checklist). This doesn’t mean pouncing

on someone the moment they do something you don’t like; it means that when it becomes

obvious that there is a fundamental mismatch between the way two parties communicate,

prioritize values, or approach a problem, you amicably hash it out before it has time to fester.

A turning point for me was when I began to view effective communication as a

superpower. LeMay drops further wisdom in his book when he states, “Great product managers

not only tolerate, but actively enjoy, the challenge of creating alignment and understanding

between different people with different experiences and perspectives” (Ch 2: Communication).

I’ve had several instances where effective communication skills helped me resolve both concrete

and developing issues. A concrete example occurred in community college when I successfully

advocated on behalf of my classmates to allow a study card for the final exam. I presented our

request in a way that aligned with my professor’s educational goals, emphasizing the learning

opportunity available in distilling a semester’s worth of information onto a single 4x6 notecard.

In another instance, I stepped in to diffuse an argument in my prison cell between a woman from

South Central LA and a woman from Northern California over a cultural misunderstanding—

explaining that, in the context of their conversation, the seemingly offensive term used was a

sign of admiration. The great fact of communication is that it has the power to span enormous

divides across culture, education, and socioeconomic status. As the world becomes increasingly

divisive, strong communication skills are non-negotiable for anyone looking to work in groups

for any significant amount of time.

3

However, there will inevitably be scenarios where proactive communication is not

enough to bridge the gap between opposing views. Sometimes, despite our best efforts to connect

and clarify, misunderstandings can escalate, leading to conflicts that require more than just clear

communication. In these scenarios, we need effective conflict resolution strategies. To zoom out

a bit, let’s motivate why conflict is so detrimental to a healthy work environment. In Neil

Bearden’s Case Study: An Office Romance Gone Wrong, we see how interpersonal conflict can

escalate to create an overwhelmingly hostile workplace, branching out to affect several parties.

One industry expert suggests one of the affected parties “stick it out at least until her stock

options vest” (5) while another advises the aggrieved against “leav[ing] her current job before

she secures a new one”(4). The common thread across this advice is that the employee should, to

some degree, check-out mentally while either biding their time or searching for better options. In

many ways, this is more insidious than flat quitting.

Because conflict is inevitable, building good conflict resolution strategies is essential to

safeguard our teams from suboptimal performance or outright failure. In my various work

experiences, I have learned that, as with communication skills, strong conflict resolution skills

transcend personalities and personal backgrounds. I’ve used the same strategies to diffuse

tension with a burly woman in the prison kitchens as I used to come to an agreement with a

wealthy Stanford classmate who thought group projects should take a backseat to mid-quarter

trips to Asia. The common threads I’ve found in effective conflict resolution have been empathy

and accountability. First, I work to understand my counterpart's perspective. If I can’t understand

the motivations behind the conflict, finding a suitable resolution becomes exceedingly difficult.

Once I identify a common ground with my teammate, I shift my focus to accountability. I make

every effort to create mutually agreeable solutions in my working relationships, even in

4

situations where I may lack respect for the individual on a fundamental level. Taking ownership

of my role in the conflict has often been a turning point; acknowledging my part helps diffuse

tension and reframe the situation. I have always been able to identify an area where my

behaviors have put me in a position to be let down or otherwise upset. When I center on the one

thing fully within my control—my own actions—I begin to feel a sense of true team-ness with

the person I was just in active conflict with. Ironically enough, I’ve found that successfully

navigating conflict with a teammate has oftentimes resulted in a stronger working relationship

than we had previously. As a developed skill, conflict resolution has the power to act as an

efficiency multiplier, allowing teammates to operate with enhanced trust and cohesion.

Effective teams should always seek ways to improve performance, and one of the main

drivers of this improvement is quality feedback. In Case Study: Give Your Colleague the Rating

He Deserves—or the One He Wants?, Ben, a slacking coworker, only becomes concerned with

feedback when it’s time for his teammates to assign him a performance rating (Mayo 144).

Similarly, his teammate Nisha doesn’t think about providing actionable feedback until she’s

nearly ready to cast her judgment (142). It’s notable that Nisha eventually confronts Ben with a

direct question: “Why didn’t you do what you said you would do?” (141). While directness is an

essential component of effective feedback, directness without purpose can often backfire. Like

conflict resolution, feedback is most effective when it’s rooted in empathy and constructive

intent, creating an environment where both parties feel supported in their growth.

During my internship this summer, I made a conscious effort to ensure my team felt

comfortable giving me feedback. I would gently push back whenever my manager or mentor

claimed they had no constructive feedback for me, asking questions like, “If I were to focus on

improving in a single area this week, what would you suggest I focus on?” I found that openly

5

inviting feedback encouraged my team to be more receptive to my feedback as well. When they

saw that I was genuinely open to constructive criticism, they trusted that my feedback was an

earnest investment in our collective success. A significant turning point in my view of Reddit’s

culture came when Frederick Lee, the Chief Information Security Officer, made his own

performance review accessible company-wide on Reddit. His humility in sharing not only his

achievements but also his team’s toughest critiques helped me see that Reddit’s culture valued

transparency and growth. Knowing that even senior leaders were open to feedback reinforced the

idea that falling short was acceptable as long as the primary focus was on sustained improvement

toward long-term goals.

As society continues to incorporate technology into every aspect of life, maintaining a

solid offering of technical skills is more important than ever, but strong interpersonal skills are

the true multiplier for successful teamwork. Communication, conflict resolution, and feedback

are the cornerstones that elevate team performance beyond what technical abilities alone can

achieve. As highlighted previously, proactive communication prevents misunderstandings before

they escalate, empathetic conflict resolution fosters trust and cohesion, and constructive feedback

drives continual improvement. Together, these skills create an environment where individuals

feel empowered to contribute fully, knowing that their growth is supported by the team. When

teams invest in these interpersonal dynamics, they improve outcomes both short and long term.

Mastering these skills has the power to turn a super-performer into a superhero.

6

Works Cited

Bearden, J. Neil. “Case Study: An Office Romance Gone Wrong.” Harvard Business Review,

Harvard Business Review, 11 Feb. 2020, hbr.org/2016/09/case-study-an-office-romance-

gone-wrong.

LeMay, Matt. Product Management in Practice: A Practical, Tactical Guide for Your First Day

and Every Day After. O’Reilly, 2022.

Mayo, Anthony J., et al. “Case Study: Give Your Colleague the Rating He Deserves-or the One

He Wants?” Harvard Business Review, 6 Nov. 2020, hbr.org/2020/01/case-study-give-

your-colleague-the-rating-he-deserves-or-the-one-he-wants.

Netflix. “Netflix Culture: Freedom & Responsibility.” SlideShare, uploaded by Netflix, Aug.

2009, slideshare.net/netflix/netflix-culture-1798664.