What makes working in teams hard and how do we mitigate these problems?

Teamwork makes the dream work, or so the saying goes. The problem is that dreams are conceived in the

mind of the individual, and do not naturally evolve into a shared vision held by a group. Still, noteworthy

achievements are typically accomplished by a collective, not the individual. Furthermore, in professional

settings collaboration is necessary for successful business outcomes. So while at times challenging, it is

crucial to understand how to best work with others in a team setting. In this essay, I will use personal

experiences to reflect on the importance of effective communication, negotiation and conflict resolution,

and feedback mechanisms in successful teams.

Effective Communication

Hearing is not the same thing as listening. A quick google search reveals that hearing merely entails

perceiving with the ear that a sound was made, while listening involves giving one’s attention to a sound.

While this distinction emphasizes an important point for the person receiving information, something

similar can be said about the difference between simply “making sound” and speaking with purpose. In

professional contexts, the onus of effective communication is not solely on the giver or receiver of

information, it is ultimately on both. There are countless books, workshops and even consultants that help

people, especially those aspiring to be or those already in leadership positions. This highlights the

complexities of communication which can be as complicated or simple as we make it out to be.

I believe that effective communication boils down to two things: empathy and purpose. Although we may

spend time developing soft skills and practicing communication strategies, I’ve found that honing in on

motivation is equally important. While we may be motivated at work by financial success, career

advancement or personal ambition, if those motivations also inform our way of communicating with

colleagues, they may have a harder time being open and productive with us. Being able to understand and

share in our team members’ feelings can foster a sense of community and trust. These can help harmonize

the group’s efforts and even make the experience more enjoyable.

In professional settings, being able to articulate the team’s purpose ensures that everyone is rowing in the

same direction. This can also be said in everyday work conversations. We have to be clear in the purpose

of our speech, whether it's to convey a concern, idea or suggestion. It’s on everyone to listen intently and

to speak with good reason. Thinking on FitPulse, I definitely felt empathy went a long way in making our

team effective. In the peer feedback we just received, one of my team members wrote, “I know there is a

bit of a weird dynamic because we all know each other but I hope you feel comfortable speaking up.” It’s

true that my three teammates were already friends before joining the class, but from the beginning they

were very welcoming and made sure to hear my ideas. This comment makes it clear that they had me and

my feelings about being the “newcomer” in mind the entire time. In one of the suggestions for

improvement, I was told to “communicate which tasks you'd want to take the lead on” which speaks to

the need for me to improve on speaking with purpose.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Conflict, unfortunately, has a negative connotation. It sounds like the opposite of peace and harmony. But

if handled well, conflict can bring people together on the road to harmony. In work settings especially,

conflict is not something to be avoided, as a diversity of opinions and ideas can produce better outcomes.

Work questions such as team direction, best use of resources and product development rarely have one

“right” answer, which is why conflict resolution goes hand in hand with negotiation. Negotiation referring

to the team process of reaching agreement on an issue.

The word principle denotes a fundamental truth which can be applied to any scenario. So a negotiation

principle would ideally be universal and practical. Two such principles that have become clear to me as

I’ve worked with my FitPulse team are: nobody is 100% right and there is always a resolution. The

acknowledgement that no sufficiently complex question has a perfect answer allows us to approach

conflict with a touch of humility and open-mindedness. The belief that agreement is possible motivates

dialogue and resolution.

One instance of conflict that comes to mind was when my team was working on our pitch deck and

needed to come up with a competitive landscape to visually represent the incumbents in the space we

were entering. A 2x2 matrix was the agreed upon choice to represent this, but there was conflict when it

came to the axis labels. One of our team members had made a matrix draft with an Individual-Team

horizontal axis and a Performance-Wellness vertical axis. Although those labels made sense in our

market, I didn’t feel that they would be easily digestible in such a brief presentation to panelists who may

not be intimately familiar with fitness wearables. I felt that a Generalist-Athlete Specialized horizontal

axis and High End-Budget vertical axis would be more easily understood. Since I was in charge of the

Competitive Landscape, I went ahead and created the latter matrix. But in our final in-person meeting

before the presentation, we revisited both options and decided to include my teammate’s version in the

presentation because it differentiated our product by allowing us to own the Team-Wellness quadrant. My

version was included in the appendix because the competitor pricing information was still valuable. This

experience highlights the negotiation and conflict resolution strategy of synthesizing everyone’s good

ideas into an even better final product. Intra-team negotiation shouldn’t be a process of “give and take”,

but rather the process of creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Feedback Insights

Although most of us feel that we’re pretty self-aware, we have a tendency to overstate our strengths and

minimize our weaknesses when self-evaluating. Other people, especially our team members, can offer

valuable insight in professional settings. Just as we may be surprised to hear what our voice actually

sounds like in a video, we may be surprised by what others have noticed while working with us. Feedback

can help us more accurately judge ourselves and our work. This subject builds off of the previous two

items, as effective communication and conflict resolution helps teams nurture a sense of trust which paves

the way for honest feedback. We are more willing to listen to and apply advice when we’re confident that

the other person is on the same page and has our best interests at heart. In my experience, feedback has

been key to whatever success I’ve had, big and small. From being advised to make my college application

essay more personal to being encouraged to be more expressive in my team for this class.

In an ideal world, we would all focus on the content of someone’s feedback, constructive criticism or

advice to better ourselves in and out of the workplace. In reality, we tend to not just focus on the feedback

itself, but also on who is providing it and how it’s being delivered. This reality is important to remember,

both for the person providing feedback and the one receiving it. The advisor, so to speak, needs to provide

feedback that’s relevant to the work at hand and preferably something they’ve put into practice

themselves, in a clear and respectful way. The advisee needs to mainly focus on the specific counsel,

while remembering that giving advice is an uncomfortable task, so the advisor’s words should be met

with grace and appreciation for their effort.

Conclusion

While working in teams may be challenging at times, it’s important to remember that the things worth

doing usually take effort. I believe that cultivating certain qualities and adopting certain attitudes are

paramount to successful collaboration. By cultivating empathy for our teammates and speaking with

purpose, we’ll be able to communicate effectively. By approaching disagreement with humility and an

understanding that our answer can be better than my answer, we can not only resolve conflict, but use

conflict to get even closer to a great solution. By appreciating the person willing to go through the trouble

of providing feedback and valuing their unique perspective, we can better ourselves and our team’s final

deliverable. In improving our communication, conflict resolution and feedback, we can grow as

professionals in the workplace, and as people in the world at large.