Conversations Reflection

Despite conversations being the foundation of relationships, they may also be the most

difficult and intricate daily dance we participate in. In a one-on-one, you must be aware of your

and your partner’s body language, tone of voice, and verbal cues in equal measure. In group

settings, that awareness must be multiplied to accommodate everyone. Effective communication,

negotiation, conflict resolution, and feedback are crucial in overcoming the inherent challenges

of teamwork. To achieve these four goals, it is essential that team members communicate often

with constant feedback, positive and negative, and are open to conflicting opinions and their

resulting discussions.

For effective communication in a professional context, which is the clear exchange of

ideas, data, and feedback such that everyone is heard and understood, it is important that

everyone participates in sharing and listening to information and is involved in each decision.

According to Ann Kowal Smith in Forbes, five skills help communication: listening with

humility, asking good and curious questions, challenging strongly held assumptions, disagreeing

with respect and without retribution, and widening the circle of empathy.

One time a group of mine and I employed these techniques well was in CS 147 here at

Stanford. My group was mostly made up of non-CS majors with me as the coder and the task to

make an app that solved a problem. After discovering this on our first discussion, we broke down

our workloads— with non-coders having heavier workloads at the beginning of the quarter and

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me having a heavier workload at the end of the quarter. We chose a relatively difficult problem to

solve (access to healthcare in queer communities), so we kept communication channels open and

each group would pick up minor pieces of the other’s work if necessary until we completed the

final product. We had some challenges with balance, but solved any disputes in group meetings

with a beginning check-in. These norms allowed us to stay on top of deliverables and divide

work if needed.

On the flip side, some of the worst communication skills a group and I have employed

was in CS 206, where I was similarly the only coder in my group, though earlier in my Stanford

career when I was concurrently learning full-stack coding. The work was split evenly at the

beginning of the course before falling onto me at the end to deliver a final product and I was bad

at communicating what was too much work and delegating simpler tasks to other group

members. While we met our deliverables, my team and I clashed and I spent more late nights

coding solo than I anticipated; I could have communicated better and decided on a work split

early on to mitigate these challenges and keep the team dynamics stronger while not taking too

long to finish deliverables.

Listening with humility requires that we are listening to learn, not to respond. This is a

skill that I, like most humans, overestimate my proficiency with. It does not only apply to

hearing what people are saying, but also taking their ideas and working with them (yes, and!).

While I am good at hearing what people are saying, I tend to be stubborn about talking through

every angle of new ideas before adopting them; that resistance colors the excitement of my team

members and is something I will cut to improve future group dynamics. I have also gotten

feedback from former team members that I sometimes speak over others and am unclear with my

feelings on group decisions, which are aspects of active listening that I must work on to be a

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better teammate in the future. I think I struggle to find the line between pushing back and moving

forward with ideas in time-crunch scenarios, which will come with more experience and an

active effort to benefit and understand my team.

Asking good and curious questions is proven to improve other’s perceptions of our

listening skills, so it is one way that I can improve myself as a teammate going forward. I must

ask questions that open the door for new information or further learning, as opposed to questions

that confirm information that is already known. These questions can be ambiguous or

stream-of-consciousness and still be useful. I think the best way for me to use this skill going

forward will be to ask questions that encourage further thought about how to best work a new

idea into existing ones instead of questions that hypothesize what it would look like to adopt a

new idea as I have been. Challenging strongly held assumptions is vital to avoid being stuck in

the norm solely because it is the norm. This is a benefit to taking new ideas that I will be sure to

keep in mind.

Disagreeing with respect and without retribution is a skill I a very fond of; however, I

have become too fond of disagreement without complimenting what I like about an idea. It is

exhausting to feel like all you receive is criticism, and I will strive to always include positive

commentary— though separately from negative commentary as Sarah Green Carmichael

suggests in “Everything You Need to Know About Giving Feedback”. Widening the circle of

empathy means eliminating the separation of “us” and “them”, which is the most difficult skill to

master. I can admit that I have not mastered it, and will continue to work on improving it by

investigating inward if I react negatively to an action someone takes without solid reasoning; if I

am upset without reason, there is no reason to be upset at all.

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I agree with this skill breakdown, but would add that creating a safe environment for

team members is equally important. These skills can only be built if trust exists between team

members to cultivate each of them. That takes showing up and recognizing when others do as

well— giving kudos for good work, checking in often, and trying to connect outside of just work

tasks can all be beneficial in creating effective communication in teams.

Negotiation involves finding solutions that benefit each party through discussion and

conflict resolution is the process of addressing disagreements with respect for each party’s

interests. Both involve balancing different perspectives and are essential for teamwork to avoid

points of contention before group ideas diverge too much from one another. Successfully

navigating such disagreements strengthens team bonding and team understanding of an idea,

leading to well-rounded solutions and greater team satisfaction.

One example that comes to mind in my life is a team project from a game design course I

am taking this quarter. In a game about public transportation, there was a team disagreement

about whether our game should be a collaborative multiplayer game or a single-player game.

Through discussions and listing the pros and cons of each concerning our goal outcomes, we

ultimately reached a consensus on a collaborative multiplayer format that incorporated elements

from the single-player option. Through this and past experiences, I find that transparency,

empathy, and flexibility are particularly valuable in negotiation and conflict resolution.

Transparency helps reduce misunderstandings, empathy fosters a sense of mutual respect even

during disagreements, and flexibility allows for creative solutions that integrate a variety of

perspectives.

Feedback is fundamental to professional and personal development, especially when it is

constructive and specific. It should focus on adjustable behaviors, not personal traits, and be

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encouraged and appreciated. In a team setting, regular feedback can help team members align on

a cohesive vision, refine their contributions, and improve the final product. I did not have much

team experience before coming to Stanford, so I have valued the classes where I get direct team

feedback greatly. In the past, I have received feedback to speak up more and not be afraid to

express my opinions, which I have strived to improve in this and other projects since. While I

may have been too outspoken in this project, I hope to strike the right balance in the future.

To gracefully give feedback, I would use guidelines similar to the feedback guidelines for

writing papers outlined in chapter 16 of John Bean’s book Engaging Ideas— where comments

should follow a hierarchy in the following order: does it follow the assignment (guidelines), is it

effectively organized, does it effectively manage old and new information, and is it free of

stylistic problems. By focusing on the big picture and any lack of clarity there first, feedback can

more effectively be enacted. Another piece of these guidelines is that comments should be

specific; for example, don’t just say to elaborate more, first say what is unclear.

Understanding these dynamics has enhanced my teamwork skills and made me more

aware of how I show up as a teammate. Moving forward, I will be sure to communicate my

expectations and limits but also leave space open and be accepting of new ideas even if I don’t

fully understand them. I will use these ideas to build a strong foundation of trust with future

teams and be a valuable teammate.

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