Exploring Interpersonal Dynamics in Professional Environments

Introduction

Interpersonal dynamics in professional environments not only influences productivity

and creativity, it can even determine the success or failure of a product. Interpersonal

dynamics range from communication styles and effectiveness, negotiation and conflict

resolution, and the giving and receiving of feedback. In this essay, I will highlight the

importance of getting these 3 areas right as well as highlight strategies on how to

achieve success in each area. My reflections and suggestions come from my own

personal experiences as well as the wisdom of leaders and managers.

Effective Communication and Interpersonal Dynamics

In the most basic sense, effective communication means that your utterance (or written

text such as email) achieves what you set out to achieve: proposing your new idea,

requesting someone complete a task, apologizing for a mistake you made, etc.

Strategies that help achieve one of these goals may not apply to the others; it's

important to think about what your goal is in communication so that you can be

effective.

Effective Communication in Professional Contexts

According to work management expert Julia Martins, it’s important to “aim to be clear

and concise” and “make sure the goal is to get to a better place than where you are

now” (Martin) In a professional setting in which case the goal is to solve problems and

those you communicate with are often collaborators, it’s also important that your

communication results in greater collaboration, not conflict. While we can’t always

guarantee that others will agree with us, there are ways to adjust our tone of voice and

framing of the situation that minimizes the chances the other party will feel hurt or

defensive. Larry Porter also suggests checking for understanding instead of assuming

the other party understands. (Porter)

Good and Bad Communication Examples (from experience)

While working on our Soup & Bread pitch for this class, we ran into an awkward

situation where Person 1 deleted the slide person 2 created. Person 2 confronted

Person 1 about what happened, but Person 1 failed to effectively communicate what

had happened. Observing all of this, I knew what happened but I didn’t speak up

because I didn’t want to “throw Person 1 under the bus.” The lack of communication

from Person 2 about the purpose of their slide, from Person 1 about what happened to

the slide and why, and from me about what I knew had happened resulted in a lack of

accountability and trust amongst our team members. Person 2 could’ve asked “what

happened to my slide?” in a less accusatory way, making it easier for person 1 to own

up to their choice to delete it. Person 1 should have taken responsibility for their actions

rather than act confused which led to more confusion and suspicion from Person 2. All

parties could have centered themselves on the goal of the conversation, which was not

to find who to blame, but rather to work together to locate the contents of the missing

financial projections.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Working together in teams means that ideas come from multiple sources; naturally,

ideas won’t always line up. Learning how to successfully negotiate with team members

to achieve a common goal is important if you want to see your ideas be implemented

without also alienating others. Negotiation is great for resolving conflicting ideas, but

conflict resolution is necessary for resolving interpersonal issues and conflicting

behaviors that will inevitably come up.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Strategies and Principles

Negotiation and conflict resolution are never easy, and many people get nervous about

approaching these topics. Here I’ve gathered some useful strategies that can help

ordinary people be extraordinary negotiators and conflict resolvers.

(1) No matter how tempting, don’t slide the conflict under the rug. According to Dr.

David Bradford from the GSB at Stanford University, simply agreeing to disagree

makes the conflict fester, which in turn “caus[es] the relationship to deteriorate.”

(Bradford 11). Allowing your relationship with someone you need to continue to

collaborate with deteriorate hardly fosters collaboration.

(2) In tense situations where decisions need to be made, try creating “release valves”,

or small breaks between discussing options and making decisions. (Bonsall)

This helps foster collaboration in a work environment because it can calm down

the parties involved, allowing for less reactive, emotion-driven speech and more

carefully thought out next steps.

(3) Suppress the desire to compete. The goal of negotiation and conflict resolution

should be to reconcile a relationship or more a project forward in the best

possible direction. (Bradford 11) If your goal is to prove that you’re right and the

other party is wrong (whether in ideas or behavior), your tone of voice and choice

of language may compete with the larger goal, making the situation worse than

before. Competition is the enemy of collaboration; suppressing your competitive

attitude towards coworkers is necessary to make room for collaboration.

My Personal Conflict Resolution Principles

Now that we’ve heard from the experts, here is my number one guiding principle for

conflict resolution: Remember what it’s like to feel accused, ignored, misunderstood, or

blamed by another person. It sucks! All of your defenses go up, you feel embarrassed

and hurt and unvalued, and your excitement to interact with the person causing all of

this disappears. This guiding principle may not be as applicable to someone who is not

naturally competitive and argumentative. For people who tend to be more passive, this

empathy exercise doesn’t offer any courage. Rather, it’s meant to help a defensive and

competitive person like me watch her tone and attitude so that she works towards

resolution, not personal victory.

Feedback Insights

One of the best parts about working in a team is that other people can see your

blindspots, and if they’re helpful team members, they’ll show you your blindspots in a

truthful and constructive way. Feedback is important because often, what we think

we’re doing is either not what we’re actually doing, or is not what others think we’re

doing. Nobody is perfect, thus feedback is necessary for relationships to thrive despite

mistakes and miscommunication.

How Receiving Feedback Affected Me

Feedback has been absolutely critical for my personal and professional growth. In high

school, I got feedback from some close friends that although they knew me to be a

sweet person, other classmates found me intimidating, cold, and judgmental. If my

friends didn’t have the courage to tell me this unpleasant information about how I was

perceived, I would’ve continued to go about my life wondering why it was hard to make

new friends.

I believe my ability to receive and implement feedback will have a direct positive impact

on my future performance evaluations, because it will allow me to continue to grow by

addressing blind spots. Giving feedback displays leadership because it supports others’

professional development and success; I believe this will lead to career advancement as

my leadership skills are seen and felt by those in my teams. And feedback given and

taken well leads to smooth team dynamics, since it minimizes conflict and supports

everyone’s growth.

Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Feedback

Here are two guidelines for giving feedback that I’ve collected through research:

(1) A simple “Hey, can I give you some feedback?” goes a long way because it

reduces the risk that people will respond defensively because they are caught off

guard. This tip off can help people be more receptive to hearing what you have to

say. (Carmichael 2)

(2) Give feedback for behaviors the person can change. (Porter 18) Grounding

feedback in behaviors makes it more reliant on objective facts that can’t be

disputed rather than general claims about a person that may be subjective or

even hurtful. If the person is unable to change their behavior, the feedback has no

actionable path forward and becomes painful or uncomfortable rather than

helpful.

Here are two steps for receiving feedback well by Cameron Conway. I like these steps

because they focus on how feedback can help you grow professionally, and they have

nothing to do with your emotional response to feedback which can be a huge source of

extra pain and friction:

(1) Do you trust the motives and goals of the person giving the feedback? Grounding

yourself in the good intentions and trust you have for the person can help you

take a more objective approach to evaluating what they have to say. (Conway)

(2) Does the feedback align with your professional values and goals? If so, think

about how you can take steps to implement the feedback. (Conway)

Conclusion and Reflection

In this essay, I’ve discussed the importance of and strategies for effective

communication, conflict resolution, and helpful feedback. In each of these realms, it’s

clear that focusing on a common goal and avoiding instinctive, emotion-based

reactions can help all sides navigate these potentially tense situations. And it’s clear

that when done well, honest communication, going through instead of around conflicts,

and giving and receiving feedback leads to growth and advancement for individual

careers as well as larger projects and goals.

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