Interpersonal Dynamics in Professional Environments

People are at the center of all the products we make. In human-centered design, we focus

on what it means to design so that people come first. That is why one of our greatest challenges

is understanding how to work with people. Teams can be difficult to work with, but especially in

a field like HCI, it is important that we are mindful in how we work with people, not just how we

work for people. Communication, conflict resolution, and effective feedback are all key to

creating human-centered teams. There are a ton of different approaches to the best strategies for

working with a team, and my personal philosophy around working with teams has been formed

through principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as concepts from a less likely

source: improv. The most impactful lessons I have learned about working with others has been

through improv, and I think the philosophy behind improv lessons can be applied effectively to

all aspects of working on teams, from communication to negotiation and feedback .

Communication is the backbone of all human interactions. We all need to communicate

with one another, but we often run into roadblocks with others at this stage due to issues that get

in the way of our ability to effectively and clearly communicate. There are plenty of reasons why

miscommunication occurs, but the ones that I have found to be most significant to my personal

experiences have been a lack of communication and dishonest communication. In the case of

“An Office Romance Gone Wrong,” we see both forms of miscommunication bubble up into an

untenable situation. Neither Brad nor Elizabeth communicates directly with one another about

how they are really feeling after their breakup (Bearden 110). When the business trip is floated, it

isn’t Brad and Elizabeth communicating, but a third party. Feelings go unexpressed and are

tamped down, leading to Elizabeth feeling like she should just leave (Bearden 112).

While Elizabeth’s situation is difficult, part of the issue stems from a lack of willingness

to communicate honestly with one another. It is difficult to toe this line in a professional setting,

but when the lines of professional and personal are already blurred, there is some wiggle room. If

Elizabeth and Brad could have one vulnerable conversation about what is actually bothering

Elizabeth and why it is significant, there could be much less miscommunication about the

situation (Bearden 111). Instead, the lack of communication leads to more and more resentment,

which only makes it more difficult to communicate.

The only time Elizabeth did communicate with Brad, she simply asked him to tone down

the PDA, which didn’t actually address the issue she had with the situation. It tries to address a

symptom of her issue, but instead just makes Brad feel like she is bitter about his new

relationship. This again just leads to more misinterpretation, which can easily spiral into the

situation we saw Elizabeth in at the end (Bearden 113).

This is just one example of how a lack of communication and dishonesty in

communication can be harmful to our ability to function in teams. Some effective ways to

prevent this from happening is ensuring that communication is practiced by the communicator

and the listener. A core teaching in improv is “a message not received is a message not sent”

(Madson 25). This refers to the idea that it is important for the listener to focus on what the

communicator is saying and understand what they are communicating, as well as for the

communicator to make sure that the message is received before moving on.

Communication is much more than just talking – these components of listening and

retaining the message are key to effective communication strategies. Other important strategies

include communicating often and honestly. Honest communication can be challenging: it can be

difficult to be honest in environments where you may be unfamiliar with the people you work

with, but I have learned that honesty is the keystone of effective communication. You can’t be on

the same page as your teammates if you don’t tell them what page you’re on.

Many of the strategies from effective communication are important to negotiation and

conflict resolution as well, since negotiation is just another form of communication. I have had

numerous experiences navigating conflict resolution on teams, and I have learned a lot from my

mistakes to understand what I would do differently.

My personal strategy for clear conflict resolution is similar to communication in that it

relies on consistency, openness, and honesty, for many of the same reasons as I discussed above.

The major addition I would make to understanding how to manage conflict resolution in teams is

it is important to remember that you are on the same team in the end. This may seem like kind of

an obvious and simple thought, but I think it provides the key to resolving conflicts and

negotiating within a team (Madson 63).

Conflict is unavoidable. People naturally have different opinions on things and will

defend their opinions based on what they believe is right. What is avoidable, however, is arguing.

Conflict is healthy – debate is good, being able to discuss and disagree is important to creating

good products. However, when people start arguing and defending their ideas and their opinions,

they lose the key – the understanding that we are all on the same team.

In my improv group, we recently ran into a conflict over the use of equipment. Our tech

team was adamant that we need more equipment and everyone should learn how to operate the

complicated machines we buy, while a group of others (including myself) believed we should

restrict ourselves and respect the wishes of what people want to do, instead of forcing them to

attend training to learn if they don’t want to because it is an optional activity.

As this conflict was brewing, negative feelings grew and people began to form an “us vs.

them” mentality. We got stuck in our opinions and lost sight of the fact that in the end, we are all

on the same team. Resenting each other for a different opinion was not going to resolve the

conflict: talking it through honestly and sharing our genuine feelings with one another was the

only way we could move forward, together.

We ended up having a meeting where we had this discussion and resolved our issues. It

was a tough but important conversation, and it taught me a lot about conflict resolution. It was

important not just to communicate with one another, but to adopt the right mindset about

communicating. If we come in wanting to win an argument, all we’ll do is argue. But if we know

we are working together to solve this problem, that’s when we can make actual progress

The final component of working in teams is providing feedback. Feedback is necessary

for our further growth and development as people and as team members, but it can often be

difficult to give and receive. In my experience, feedback is incredibly useful, and receiving

feedback has always helped me improve my work and myself.

However, learning how to take feedback was a less easy path. Due to some unfortunate

experiences in writer’s rooms, I have become uniquely good at receiving criticism and

constructive feedback without being emotionally affected. Most people are not thrown into the

deep end of harsh, personal criticism, and therefore don’t need to develop such a thick skin

around it, but I think the skills I learned from those experiences have taught me what is important

about giving and receiving feedback.

To take it back to improv, there is a concept introduced by Keith Johnstone called

“Status.” Status plays with the power dynamics of the relationships we have with people around

us. “High” status are people in power, and “low” status are people without power. It’s important

to note that power is not always literal: power can be social, or about attitude, or experience. The

truth of power is that it comes from a sense of superiority (Johnstone 23).

I bring this up because I feel that the key to understanding how to give and receive

feedback is understanding how it plays with status. The reason why giving feedback to

teammates can feel awkward is because you see yourself as their peer, and possibly unqualified

to give them feedback. It is much easier to give feedback from a position of power, and easier to

receive feedback when you are not in one

However, acknowledging the status dynamics here can help us move past this. Feedback

in context is what matters. The strategy here is applied by acknowledging and understanding

your position before giving and receiving feedback, and taking the feedback accordingly. Saying

something like “As your peer, I think X, because X, but that is based on my experience with X.”

shows an acknowledgment of the status and helps cushion the feedback in the context in which it

was received. This helps us clearly communicate our feedback and maintain clarity in our

relationships, without creating unnecessary superiority dynamics that can hurt feelings and our

ability to work effectively.

Overall, the principles of openness, honesty, and consistency are key to effective

communication, conflict resolution, and feedback in team dynamics. It is important to remember

that above all else, your team is full of people just like you, and respecting their personhood by

providing them with clear communication, honest discussion instead of arguments, and feedback

in context, can help you achieve success in working with teams. Additionally, throughout all this,

it is important to apply these same principles to yourself. You give what you get, and by

providing others with the respect they deserve through these strategies for working in teams, you

can receive the same respect back.

Works Cited

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ChatGPT was used for citations.