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

When I was in 9th grade, my maths teacher wrote the following geometric formula on

the whiteboard:

𝑛(𝑛 − 1)

2

He outlined how this expression represents the total number of possible connections

between the $n$ points of a shape. Before moving on, he stopped. “This equation can

also be used to describe the number of relationships that exist between $n$ people. For

example, in a group of six people there are fifteen distinct relationships in a group.

That’s a lot of individual relationships you have to manage.” To this day, this formula has

remained imprinted on my mind, becoming increasingly relevant as I joined working

groups at school and in my career. There is a litany of relationships that need to be

maintained and tended to, to ensure a team functions at its best. Often, a single

fractious relationship can tear an entire team apart. The moral of the story: working in

teams is tough. In this essay, I aim to outline some of the many complexities that arise

when working in teams, and the numerous methods that can be used to improve these

complicated situations. My arguments in this paper will centre around three distinct

mitigation strategies: effective communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, and

feedback mechanisms. By closely analysing these methods, I hope to shed some light

on the numerous ways in which we can make working in teams more manageable and

less stressful for all those involved.

Effective communication is perhaps the most paramount of the three mitigation

strategies, as it usually precedes negotiation (conflict resolution) and feedback

mechanisms in the conflict timeline. While communicating with other individuals may

seem like an inherent thing for some humans—requiring just a small amount of honesty,

transparency, and proactivity—it is often the thing that individuals struggle with the

most in interpersonal settings. A primary reason for this is, in my opinion, the ”Illusion of

Transparency,” a theory in social psychology in which people “overestimate the degree

to which their thoughts and emotions are apparent to others.” In many interpersonal

situations, we operate under the assumption that others intuitively understand our

thoughts and states of mind, and we expect them to act accordingly. Unfortunately, this

is not always the case. Humans are not telepathic, and as team members, it is crucial

that we learn to express our thoughts and feelings more explicitly, otherwise we may

end up unintentionally contributing to these complex and difficult interactions. To

enhance our capacity for effective communication, we can begin by actively listening to

our colleagues, clearly defining expectations for each team member on a project, and

ensuring that we hold regular check-ins to maintain accountability. The importance of

these practices becomes evident when examining real-life scenarios in which

communication either strengthens or breaks down team relations.

A good illustration of this dynamic is found in Mayo, Margolis, and Gallo’s Give Your

Colleague the Rating He Deserves—or the One He Wants. In this case study, Nisha is

working on a project with two colleagues at the gaming company Ness Entertainment.

While one colleague, Mark, is punctual, organised, and hard-working, the other, Ben, is

unreliable and unengaged, often leaving Nisha to shoulder more than her share of work.

This frustrates Nisha, and although the onus ultimately lies on Ben to improve his work-

ethic, Nisha fails to communicate how his lack of commitment has affected her.

Instead, she expresses her dissatisfaction through non-verbal cues, such as her tone of

voice or body language. This miscommunication leaves Ben unaware of the extent to

which his behaviour has affected his colleagues and causes the team to break down

completely. Yet, this situation is fairly easy to ameliorate: if Nisha were to take a

moment to directly address Ben’s lack of commitment, highlighting the impact it has

had on the team and recommending steps he could take to improve, it could prevent

the issue from escalating into a formal HR matter. This is just one example of many that

highlights the importance of effective communication in the workplace. However, when

direct communication fails, individuals may need to rely on another type of mitigation

strategy—negotiation and conflict resolution.

The main strategy that I use to negotiate with colleagues and resolve conflicts is

interest-based bargaining (IBB), which, according to the Federal Mediation &

Conciliation Service (FMCS) is “a collaborative approach to resolving labor and

management disputes.” Essentially, IBB focuses on the underlying interests of each

party involved in the conflict rather than their specific grievances. Through this

approach, individuals become less fixated on their own rigid solutions and instead

highlight their core needs, allowing a third-party mediator to potentially come in and

identify how a common goal between both parties can be found. I believe this method is

a positive way of resolving disputes, as each individual must listen to the needs of the

other individual and empathise with them on a deeper level, rather than going back and

forth in a “tit-for-tat” manner over who can achieve a solution in the “best way” possible.

With its methods rooted in values like collaboration, empathy, and transparency, I tend

to use this approach the most when I am resolving conflicts with individuals at school or

in my professional career.

Throughout my internship, I used IBB in order to diffuse tense situations with

colleagues. For example, I recently sat down with a colleague who believed we should

use no-code tools to complete a project instead of a coding language like Python.

Disagreeing with this approach, we got into a small argument, and I asked him why he

really wanted to use no-code tools over a scripting language. He told me directly that he

wanted to be able to contribute to the project but was struggling to find the time to learn

a coding language. I didn’t know he was under significant time pressure, and although

my preference was to complete the project with a coding language, I understood that, in

the interest of the team, it may be best to use a no-code tool. Had I not used this

method of negotiation with my colleague, it may have erupted into a bigger issue with

strong, acrimonious feelings on both sides.

When giving feedback, I like using non-violent communication (NVC), which is “a

method for communicating about areas of friction,” and the OFNR (Observation,

Feelings, Needs, and Request) method. These are personal favourites of mine that I

learned about in “CS 247A: Design for Artificial Intelligence,” as it provides a clear

structure for how to respond to difficult interactions by focussing on values like

curiosity, empathy, and openness, rather than judgement, blame, and anger.

Oftentimes, conflicts arise due to a psychological phenomenon known as the

“Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE),” which is a cognitive bias referring to an

“individual's tendency to attribute another's actions to their character or personality,

while attributing their behaviour to external situational factors outside of their control.”

An individual’s FAE can often cause them to blame others’ incompetencies on personal

factors, while neglecting situational factors that may often play a role. To combat the

negative outcomes of FAE in the workplace, I utilise the OFNR approach, in which we

attempt to resolve a conflict by describing how the other person’s behaviour has made

you feel, rather than accusing the other individual of falling short.

Recently, I was working in a group project where a teammate failed to submit their work

on time. Instead of blaming my teammate for missing deadlines, I used the OFNR

approach. I told them I’d noticed their struggle to submit on time, which was stressing

me about our deadlines. I then asked them to let me know if they needed extra support

during busy periods and to be more transparent in the future. This worked well; my

teammate was apologetic and explained they’d been swamped with midterms and a

family issue. By taking an empathetic and transparent approach with my teammate

instead of a critical one, I was able to improve the situation without having to escalate

the matter to our TAs or the teacher. When practised in the right way, negotiation and

conflict resolution can be a fantastic remedy for negative situations in the workplace,

allowing individuals to resolve issues at an early level without the need for it rise higher

up the chain-of-command.

Overall, I believe there are a variety of different ways in which an individual can explore

interpersonal dynamics in professional environments, including effective

communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, and feedback insights. While these

three mitigation strategies should be staple ways of communicating across the board, I

believe that the methods used to successfully incorporate these techniques can vary

from person-to-person. For me personally, I like to use non-violent communication,

interest-based bargaining, and the OFNR approach in order to successfully navigate

difficult situations in the workplace. With a concerted effort from all parties,

interpersonal communication in a professional environment can transform from a

source of tension to an opportunity for growth and collaboration.

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