INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS IN RELATION TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Introduction

The capacity to collaborate is one of the defining characteristics that emerges from the

development of communities. Collaboration is highly desirable, with patterns of collaboration

prevalent in both nature and our own corporate world. It allows for the pooling of resources,

ideas, efforts, and strengths that would surmount to greater capability that is otherwise

unachievable as individuals. However, collaboration amongst individuals requires navigating

through complicated social relationships in the context of a work environment. Collaboration in

professional settings is often challenging because of mismanagement of these interpersonal

dynamics; proper maintenance of these interpersonal dynamics allows for alignment of personal

and communal interests, through effective communication, negotiation, and constructive growth.

Effective Communication

In relation to interpersonal dynamics, one of the key strategies for effective

communication is active listening. Active listening is an approach in which individuals make an

active effort in not speaking, but rather understanding what people are saying and reacting to it..

Social groups typically emphasize the idea of communicating your own ideas, but this often

leads to neglect of the reception of others’ ideas. By actively listening, individuals are better able

to understand their team members and take full advantage of their ideas instead of tunnel

visioning on what people want to say rather than share.

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Drawing from personal experiences, transparency and communication is vital in

collaborating with others, as it allows for team dynamics to adapt in situations. I am currently

enrolled in CS 147, the Human Computer Interaction design class, with an average of 24 hours

per week of work. When I first took the class, I was advised by upperclassmen not to take it with

friends as the class breaks friendships due to its intensity. In full honesty, I believe that it is the

most intense project class I’ve been in, as each week practically demands work that could

constitute a full-length project in a different class. However, my team is highly transparent about

our own obligations, inside and outside of academics. There have been times where we are able

to meet asynchronously to accommodate difficult schedules or take over someone else's tasks if

they are unable to do so. There is a constant push for communication, with meeting notes in the

case of absence and clear deadlines to finish tasks.

In terms of developing and growing my own communication skills, I seek to be

transparent about my own capabilities and personal opinions. I am a strong proponent that teams

should be dynamic about their roles and obligations – in that it should not be necessarily

equivalent. Depending on team personalities and individual strengths, I typically become more

active or passive in relation to the team. In CS 177, I have put more emphasis on active listening

and reacting during my teams’ ideation process, explicitly because there are a few team members

who are very opinionated and have a strong vision of what the project should become.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

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The ability to collaborate is dependent on a mutual alignment that supersedes the

personal interests of the individuals and instead prioritizes the interests of the collective. In the

context of social interactions, social dilemmas describe the balance of an individual’s

self-interest and the interest of the community as a whole. While social dilemmas are

complicated and are variably balanced amongst individuals in a team, it is imperative that a

balance is achieved in which both personal interests and the collective interests are shared.

Resolution of these social dilemmas is dependent on a mutual understanding amongst team

members that their own personal interests align with the collective interests, which requires

communication and transparency. In order to preserve healthy interpersonal dynamics,

individuals should seek to be self-advocates as well as be reasonable in negotiating with others to

ensure that formal communication channels do not break down and all parties involved can reach

a mutual understanding.

In a case study covered by the Harvard Business Review, decision sciences professor J.

Neil Bearden discusses how an office romance ruins the workplace environment for this one

individual. She was an up and rising salesperson in the marketing department who became

romantically involved with the CFO in her company. However, they have a falling out and her

former lover becomes involved with another employee, a new recruit. The new couple flaunt

their relationship around the workplace, and she has to work extensively with the two for an

upcoming conference. Overall, she reevaluates her employment with the company because of the

office drama, favoritism from the HR department, and a potential opportunity to pivot to a

different company. Regardless of her decision to maintain or switch her employment, the entire

situation would have been better with explicit communication channels. The company culture

was not conducive to an environment where she could discuss her grievances and unfair

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treatment, as it was deeply chauvinistic and hypocritical. If there was an authority in the

company that could facilitate a negotiation that would favor her better, the company would have

still retained her as an important employee.

In relation to my personal beliefs, I believe that emotional intelligence is key to resolving

conflicts. Emotional intelligence is defined as the potential to perceive, use, and manage one’s

own emotions. Emotional intelligence does not only make you less prone to conflict, but also

allows you to empathize with others and find common grounds where people can emotionally

share. After taking control of emotions, a logical solution can be easily achieved through some

reasoning.

Feedback Insights

Communicating opinions over work matters is essential, because it allows for team

members to feel like they have direction over the project. Agency over their work provides a

sense of attachment to the quality of the work they produce, as well as opens the doors to

discussion and constructive criticism. According to Benjamin Baker, a writer at MIT Sloan

Management Review, open dialogue promotes trust amongst employees and facilitates the

ideation process. It often promotes more discussion and scrutiny over the design, allowing for

teams to catch key fixes that would otherwise go unnoticed. A workplace that actively

encourages employees to speak their minds will foster greater communication and engagement in

matters in and out of the workplace, providing a sense of community instead of a corporate

environment. According to Achievers, an employee engagement platform, increased

transparency allows for a more responsive workforce that increases job satisfaction, employee

retention, and productivity.

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In my personal experience, receiving constructive feedback is important in maintaining

healthy interpersonal dynamics and improving oneself as an individual as part of a team. In CS

224N, I received positive feedback, with an acknowledgement that I had contributed to the team.

This greatly improved my morale and attachment to the project, as I was struggling with issues

external to the class and had to reallocate some of my work to others during some weeks. When I

was more free, I took agency in completing tasks that were not done or tasks that I had

bandwidth for. I believe that there are times where people struggle, and feedback and

encouragement from the team allows for individuals to better grasp how their team perceives

them and motivates them to do better.

Giving constructive feedback must seek to be constructive. It is not to admonish a

persons’ efforts or lack thereof. In “How Good Do I Have to Be”, the author writes about how to

manage personal boundaries by taking criticism. They write about how the nature of criticism

matters, as it should seek to be constructive rather than be insulting. Additionally, those who do

seek to give feedback must deliver it in a way that is mindful of their current work situation and

not cause resistance in their life. However, it should also be honest and reflective of their work in

the context of the group. I personally believe that giving constructive feedback should be done

tastefully, in that it comments on things that they can change about their behavior and work. It

should also have a time and place, as brutal feedback can kill personal confidence and team

morale.

Receiving constructive feedback should also be seen through a lens that it is meant to

improve yourself. Understand that the message comments on your contributions in the work

environment, rather than a comment about your personal life. Internalize constructive feedback,

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and iteratively incorporate values you need to work on to ensure that you are acting on that

feedback.

Conclusion and Reflection

Collaboration as a whole is dependent on communication. It is important to

communicate, to be transparent in your interests and capacity but also be receptive towards

others’ communications. In doing so, collaborative work environments are able to cultivate a

positive work culture where its members feel comfortable voicing their beliefs. This in turn

improves engagement and discussion, where then people can align their personal interests with

the interests with the community. By maintaining healthy interpersonal dynamics, teams can seek

to understand others, mitigate conflicts, and allow for ideation that forms the foundation for

successful collaboration.

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