6

BUILDING HIGH-QUALITY WRITING TEAMS

Lenny: We made it. And it's all thanks to teamwork.
*Carl: Yeah, *my* teamwork.*

—The Simpsons, 1989

6.1 IN THIS CHAPTER

A great deal of technical writing occurs in teams. Much of *STREAM Tools* concerns itself, in fact, with helping your writing team perform efficiently and effectively by automating processes and specifying practices that will help your team write high-quality documents. These processes eliminate much of the ambiguity that can occur when multiple people collaborate to create a document.

However, what do we make of the "human element" of collaborative authorship? How do different people from diverse backgrounds combine their talents into a single high-performing team? Drawing on the vast amount of literature published on teamwork, this chapter explains what it takes to establish and sustain high quality writing teams by:

Technical Writing for Teams: The STREAM Tools Handbook, by Alexander Mamishev and Sean Williams

- Understanding the benefits and challenges of teamwork
- Identifying team goals and assigning member roles
- Managing teamwork at a distance

We also recognize that teams are frequently distributed over the globe and that those teams collaborate through online tools. Therefore, this chapter also offers guidelines for:

- Building trust among team members who will never meet each other face-to-face
- Working across cultural and geographical boundaries with sensitivity
- Selecting communication tools to support virtual teamwork

After reading this chapter, your team should be aware of what it will take to succeed not just in the act of producing a document, but also of the benefits, challenges, and best practices of managing the human element of collaboration.

6.2 UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF TEAMWORK

Many definitions of teams have appeared in the last three decades, but, in principle, most definitions share a few common elements:

1. Teams consist of at least two people working together.
2. The team members have diverse and complementary skill sets, not the same skill set.
3. The team works toward a common goal.
4. The team must produce something or solve a problem.

A great deal of literature has appeared on teamwork in industry, focusing on explaining and refining these characteristics, particularly since the 1970s. Many companies, particularly those in the United States, maintained a great deal of suspicion about teamwork throughout most of the 20th century, even as other countries, such as Japan, began to demonstrate that teamwork produces higher quality products faster and more cheaply.

As an industry practice, however, teamwork has now become the dominant paradigm—and has probably been so since the late 1980s. In fact, teamwork has become so dominant that the practice of working in teams appears transparent and common sense to most people, whether they work in universities, financial service companies, or in large R&D labs at companies like Proctor and Gamble (which was

one of the first large companies to embrace "quality circles," an early form of autonomous work teams).

The reasons for this paradigm shift have been documented well in the substantial literature available on teams. Below we review the most essential benefits of working in teams, but we also note the principal challenges of teamwork, because many challenges do exist. However, knowing the challenges of teamwork prior to beginning a collaborative project—and developing some strategies for overcoming those challenges—improves the likelihood that these challenges won't derail your team's efforts.

6.2.1 The Payoff of Teamwork

Teams have become a dominant aspect of work life for one simple reason: they work. The now-famous book *The Wisdom of Teams* demonstrates that teams "outperform individuals acting alone or in larger organizational settings." Several subsequent studies also demonstrate the noticeable benefits of teamwork, including:

- Increased employee motivation
- Better product quality
- Higher quality of work life
- Increased employee satisfaction
- Enhanced productivity

These benefits evolve directly from the interdependent nature of teams and specifically from a few qualities inherent in the definition of teams:

1. *Diverse membership.* Teams have multiple members who demonstrate a mix of skills, experiences, technical abilities, worldviews, and interpersonal characteristics—this leads to a richer set of possibilities for solving problems. The members of a team become interdependent as they begin to rely on each other to achieve the team's larger goals and the team comes to realize that no one person can solve the problems they face. The creativity generated by their different viewpoints leads to a better solution than any one individual could conceive.
2. *Centralized group goal.* When team members clearly understand the overall vision and assist in developing that purpose or direction, cohesion results. The cooperative goals that result produce a commitment to solving the problem rather than focusing on individual differences. Additionally, teams with shared goals will more easily develop standardized operating procedures, assuming that group processes have not been articulated for them by the organization or by a manager.
3. *Performance-oriented outcomes.* The team's outcomes differ from the team's goal. The goal might be to "win a grant," but the outcome would be the written

grant proposal. The goal might be to influence the way pharmacologists understand a drug, but the outcome would be a research report. So, while the team has shared goals, they also must agree on the tangible deliverables of their work—how they'll know when they're done or how they'll judge their success. Different members will participate in the different aspects of producing the outcomes, but the team must share an understanding of what those outcomes are.

4. *Individual and community responsibility.* Assuming that the team has agreed on its desired goals and outcomes, each member then becomes responsible not only for their own personal successes, but also for those of the team. In other words, somebody skilled at editing might contribute only to the editing functions of preparing a grant proposal, but their individual success with that piece determines the success of the entire group. Unless that individual succeeds at the assigned individual tasks, the whole team fails. This dual sense of responsibility—first for one's own work and second how it dovetails with the entire team's work—also accounts for the sense of interdependence and respect for diversity that characterizes teams.

Viewed as an aggregate, these characteristics of teams create a circle, where participation builds individual ownership of the problem and outcomes but relies on the group to succeed at meeting those goals. This interdependence between individual success and group success largely accounts for the payoff of working in teams.

6.2.2 Some Principle Challenges of Teamwork

Even though teams have many benefits, challenges do exist for establishing successful writing teams. In principle, one could simply hold a mirror to the four characteristics listed above to discern the challenges of teams, as described in Table 6.1.

Each of these challenges requires a bit of commentary both to explain why the challenge might arise as well as how a team—or the manager directing the team—can avoid these pitfalls.

TABLE 6.1. Some Characteristics and Challenges of Teamwork

Characteristic	Challenge
Diverse membership	Poor match of member skills to task requirements
Centralized group goal	Competing member goals
Performance-oriented outcomes	Too much focus on the social aspects of the team
Individual *and* community responsibility	No accountability to the team; too much reliance on the team

6.2.2.1 Challenge 1: Poor Match of Member Skills to Task Requirements. This challenge arises when teams emerge without foresight into the project's goals. Frequently, for example, we build teams from those around us rather than considering what skills a project requires and who among our associates possesses those skills. Let's call these "Convenience Teams." Convenience Teams will seldom perform with the quality of a more thoughtfully constructed team either because the members lack necessary skills or because the members possess skills or views that are too homogenous. In the first case—lack of necessary skills—the team obviously will not be able to perform the appropriate tasks without some difficulty or learning. In the second case—homogenous views—the team might devolve into "group think" where the members don't challenge each other by demonstrating a healthy portion of creative conflict. In either situation, the project will suffer.

To avoid the challenge of poor match of member skills to task requirements, take time, first, to confirm what the goals and outcomes of the project will be; this way you can foresee what skills and knowledge will be necessary to complete the project efficiently and effectively. Second, take time to match individual people to individual requirements so that you can be confident the team members cover the range of necessary expectations.

Finally, *beware of representative teams*. Project teams constructed to be representative seldom experience as much success as teams constructed according to skills. Exceptions exist, of course, such as in committees with the purpose of representing. However, most often representative groups do not make high-quality project teams.

6.2.2.2 Challenge 2: Competing Member Goals. This challenge encompasses the flip side of group think and homogeneity, and occurs when team members cannot agree on a centralized goal. Often, group members will join a team (or be assigned to one) and not fully understand the scope or purpose of the project. In this situation, conflict might emerge as team members tussle over the central organizing principle of the team rather than discuss how to achieve a shared goal. Creative conflict that evolves from different perspectives on how to achieve a shared goal should be encouraged. However, conflict over the definition of the goal will most often be counterproductive and lead to interpersonal conflict.

To avoid the challenge of competing member goals, the initial meeting of the team should clearly outline the purpose and goals of the team, including the stakes or significance of the centralized goal as outlined in Chapter 5, "Planning, Drafting, and Editing Documents." For example, the team isn't just "writing a grant proposal for studying how to implement the 3-D Internet in educational settings." Instead, the team is writing a grant proposal to help lay a foundation for pedagogical innovations that will drive the success of the next generation of college students. In this case, the goal is not the grant proposal or the study itself, but rather helping college students succeed through pedagogical innovation. In both cases, we can inquire into the larger significance or purpose behind these tasks to discern the real goal. Clearly articulating the goal—either as it is articulated to the team by a manager, or as it evolves

from conversations in the team's kickoff meeting—is the best antidote to this challenge.

6.2.2.3 Challenge 3: Too Much Focus on the Social Aspects of the Team. Make no mistake: teams require a great deal of socializing (and socialization, too). However, this challenge arises when teams forget their purpose of achieving some specific set of outcomes and instead focus too much on member cohesion or personal interactions. Because people generally like to be liked by their peers and most people enjoy quality human interactions, team members become distracted from their goal and spend more meeting time talking about families, friends, pets, or weekend activities than they do talking about the work they need to accomplish. As a result, the team becomes tightly bonded—a good thing—but the primary focus of the team shifts from task-orientation to maintaining the group's shared social identity. While having a strong team identity leads to a feeling of empowerment, it can also lead to group think, squelching the creative conflict or focus that characterizes the best teams.

To avoid the challenge of focusing too much on the social aspects of the team, team members should institute a process where there is a small amount of time allocated in meetings or conversations for social activities, after which the team will focus on the assigned tasks. For example, if a team is scheduled to work for 90 minutes, then perhaps the first 15 minutes can be socializing and restoring personal bonds and the subsequent 75 minutes can be work-oriented. Certainly, teams should socialize; it builds cohesion. However, teams should focus on the outcomes expected and spend the bulk of their time on task while maintaining the camaraderie established by the more social components of the team.

6.2.2.4 Challenge 4: No Accountability to the Team or Too Much Reliance on the Team. This challenge results when teams have not built a cohesive group or when team members do not share the same understanding of expectations. In the first case, team members who do not feel as though they belong to the group, either because they have a sense of superiority or because they have been alienated, will work in selfish ways that might run counter to the general direction of the team. They feel accountable only to themselves and believe that so long as they do their part, they're done. This challenge might be summarized by the person who says, "I'll just do all the work because I don't trust anybody in my team will do it as well as I can." Clearly, this works against the sense of community responsibility that makes teams successful. Individuals only succeed if the whole team succeeds, and so whenever actions hinder the success of others, those actions should be curtailed.

On the opposite side of this continuum, individuals might rely too heavily on the other team members and feel no individual accountability for their work. This line of reasoning might be summarized by those who say, "Well, I'll do what I can, and if I can't get my work done, somebody else on the team will pick up the slack. Besides, they're better at it than I am, anyway." In this particular case, the team member exploits the cohesion of the team as well as others' sense of accountability. In many ways, this position is as selfish as the first position and should be curtailed.

To avoid the challenge of no accountability or too much reliance on the team, team members should be assigned clear responsibilities according to their knowledge and skills. We outlined a method for this in Section 5.3.5. Further, team members should report frequently on the progress of their individual components and should not immediately assume the responsibilities of others—either because they think they can do it better themselves, or because they think others would do it better for them. In either case, the individual has stepped outside the boundaries of their expertise and in both cases demonstrated a lack of respect for others.

Ultimately, teams will function best if they have a clear set of goals and expectations and show respect for others on the team. This respect will usually evolve from recognizing that the team has been constructed to include diverse perspectives, skills, and knowledge, and that this diversity most often leads to the best outcomes. If team members see others as contributors rather than competitors, the team members will have more open and honest communication. When individuals feel accountable to others on the team for contributing their share, everybody will feel a greater sense of ownership in their own tasks, and ultimately the team will be more successful.

6.3 IDENTIFYING TEAM GOALS AND ASSIGNING MEMBER ROLES

Most of us have been a member of a team at one point or another in our lives, whether we played team sports as kids, served in the military, or conducted research in a large lab. Each of us has also had our share of positive experiences that balance out some of the more well-known negative team experiences. While some of the ideas above present options for how to construct teams and why teams—in the abstract—succeed or fail, we can identify some concrete tactics for helping teams to succeed.

6.3.1 Define Roles and Procedures Clearly

Teams and groups are not the same. Teams assemble for specific outcomes and to accomplish specific goals, and so whenever we assign teams, or whenever we participate in one, the first step is to understand the type of team we are on, and what others expect our team to deliver. Many publications discuss the different types of teams and their associated outcomes. Perhaps one of the most approachable is that published by the National Defense University in their manual *Strategic Leadership and Decision Making*. In this manual, teams are arranged according to their outcomes as shown in Table 6.2.

Writing teams, then, are rather complex; the same team will move through most, or all, of these stages at one point or another in its evolution. For example, a team might be formed as a *project development team* to imagine some new piece of technology for a company, but that team quickly moves to an *organized action team* as they begin to conduct their research, and the cycle repeats itself as they translate their research into a document. The team again becomes a *project development team* as they design the specifications for the document, moves to a *production team* as they author the content,

TABLE 6.2. The Characteristics and Challenges of Teamwork

Type of Team	Expected Outcomes
Production *(assembly teams, maintenance crews, shift workers)*	Repeated cycles of generating material or service goods according to predefined specifications
Advice and Involvement *(advisory boards, panels, representative groups)*	Provide advice to managers; allow opportunity for member involvement in decision making
Project development *(research teams, task forces, consulting services)*	Design specifications for production; actionable guidelines for implementation
Organized action *(sports teams, negotiating teams, surgical crews)*	Specific, short-term deliverables under frequently changing conditions

and ends as an *organized action team* as specific individuals complete cycles of edits and revisions.

A couple of key points emerge here. First, the team members need to understand their primary charge *before* beginning their work together. If the team members know what type of deliverables others expect, that can guide their work. Second, and specifically in the context of writing teams, team members need to share a vision of where they are in the process. Are they currently working on planning a document or are they actually producing it? Once team members share an understanding about the type of team they belong to, and why their organization wants them to accomplish something, member roles and procedures become much easier to define. Each of these features should be an outcome of a team kick-off meeting as discussed in Chapter 5.

6.3.1.1 Define Team Roles. Team members are assigned to a specific team most often because they have some particular skill set or knowledge base that enables them to contribute in a unique way to the team. In their book *The Wisdom of Teams*, Katzenbach and Douglas discuss how to define team roles in the most effective manner:

- *Assign individuals to specific issues.* Specific people have different talents and so a specific person is most often best suited to work on a particular part of the larger problem. Additionally, if the person knows their specific assignment, it's far easier for them to assume ownership of that piece while remaining accountable to the group for that part.
- *Assign membership based on skills or knowledge, not position.* Membership based on skills helps defuse hierarchical concerns that can cause tension in a team. When members all recognize that they have been included for a particular purpose, it not only increases the sense of obligation to perform on that specific

task, but it also increases respect for the expertise of others. Mutual respect is the foundation of high-performing teams.

- *Assign specific tasks to multiple individuals for later integration.* Tasks and issues are not the same; a task is a course of action necessary to overcome a particular issue. When multiple members collaborate to complete a specific task according to their expertise, that task builds cohesion at an individual level rather than at the level of the whole team. This small-scale cohesion increases involvement and a sense of accountability to others.
- *Require members to complete equivalent amounts of work.* If members have been assigned to specific issues and specific tasks, presumably those tasks will be distributed among the team's membership. It also ensures that each team member has a stake in the outcomes since their contribution becomes a key part of the final product.
- *Move beyond hierarchical interaction.* Teams often fail because one or more members forget that each individual has been assigned to the team for a specific reason. In this case, those individuals' opinions come to dominate and squelch the creative tensions present among the team members. Rather than trying to force one viewpoint, move toward shared understandings of the issues, tasks, and outcomes.

These guidelines provide concrete advice not only on constructing teams, but also demonstrate how teams benefit from clearly assigned roles: members will approach each other with respect; assume accountability for their portion of a project; divide the massive amounts of work into manageable pieces; and coordinate their small-scale actions as they move toward a larger deliverable. Each of these ultimately results in a tightly bonded team where members recognize that their individual contributions contribute to the larger team's success. It requires, however, a genuine belief in the capabilities of others.

6.3.1.2 Define Team Procedures. Just as assigning team roles is key to a team's success, defining team procedures is also key because it tells team members *how* to do what they need to do. Sometimes, organizations have standard operating procedures for addressing the procedures teams should undertake. When the organization possesses these types of documents, obviously, the team should follow them.

However, most organizations have not articulated standard team processes and therefore they allow team leaders or managers to specify how a team should operate. In this case, teams should consider recording and clarifying a few key processes to be sure that the team members operate in parallel. These processes are outlined below.

When and How to Communicate. Of all the features of teams, the single most important thing is that teams communicate. Without frequent and quality communication, teams will not build trust and cohesion and will therefore not complete their tasks. Team members should articulate when they will communicate and how they will communicate by addressing questions like these:

When to Communicate	How to Communicate
1. At what intervals will the entire team meet (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly)?	1. Will the team meet face-to-face, via conference call, online, or some combination?
2. At what intervals will specific work groups or sub-teams meet (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly)?	2. Will team meetings be structured by agenda and, if so, who suggests agenda items, who collects them, and who circulates the agenda?
3. At what time of day will the team meet (making sure to allow for time zone differences)?	3. Will team meetings require "formal" procedures (e.g., Robert's Rules) or be informal conversations?
4. How long will meetings last?	4. Who will lead meetings?
5. How far in advance of a meeting will an agenda be circulated?	5. How will the team share documents and information (e.g., centralized server system, wiki, email, bulletin board, document sharing website, virtual world)?
6. Under what special circumstances can an unscheduled meeting be called?	6. What types of information are appropriate to share in which way?

How Decisions Will Be Made. Researchers have identified and continue to refine ways for teams to make effective decisions. However, a few methods appear across the literature as outlined below:

Decision Method	Associated Process
Decision by majority vote	Members debate issues and then, at a point when it appears the options have been exhausted, members cast ballots, secret or public, on the topic. Provides clear results in a relatively efficient manner that most members can accept.
Decision by consensus	Members outline all issues and through discussion build a common understanding of the issues. Builds buy-in for decision and enhances cohesion in the group, but is not suitable when quick or small decisions are necessary.
Decision by leader	The team meets to discuss issues (or not) and defers to the leader's decision. Enables quick action but does not build group cohesion and might lead to a weak decision, particularly on complex issues.
Decision by expert	Similar to a decision by leader except the team defers to the expert on an issue. Shares challenges with the decision by leader model where experts might not have all necessary data and there is less team ownership of the solution.
Decision by tool	An automated decision-making tool (frequently electronic) that enables a team to disassemble a complex problem through structured questioning. If members trust the tool, it can build cohesion and produce group ownership of decisions. Good when regular processes fail.

How Conflicts Will Be Resolved. Conflict resolution, like the prior two topics, has occupied the minds of researchers for many years and produced a great amount of literature. Perhaps one of the most famous models comes from the best-selling book *Getting to Yes*, which remains a classic in negotiation. Some key tenets of this approach appear below:

Principle	Description
Separate the people from the problem	Conflicts are best resolved when members focus on the issue under debate rather than personalities. Making conflict personal seldom (if ever) results in quality resolution. In cases of personality conflicts, members should agree to assignments that utilize their respective strengths and never stoop to destructive behaviors.
Focus on interests, not positions	*Interests* represent underlying reasons that people desire an outcome that might differ from that of another person. A member should keep asking *why* until the root cause for their position is uncovered. *Positions* represent manifestations of interests, or *how* a person wants to realize their interests (e.g., *interest* = reducing the amount of overtime necessary to write a grant proposal; *position* = involving fewer collaborators).
Expand and invent options	Approach the issue with a "both/and" attitude where the primary goal is to meet the needs of both parties. How can both parties' goals be met if we propose a creative option? Relies on brainstorming possible alternatives by asking "what if" and suspending judgment of options until all options are on the table. Select options, or composites of options, that show promise for meeting most of the needs of both parties.
Use objective decision-making criteria	Parties agree on a "third source" for deciding the merit of one position over another and agree to be subject to the decision of those objective criteria. The objective source can be data, mediators, established conventions, or precedent (e.g., co-authors agree to present a grant proposal to a seasoned, highly–funded investigator to determine which of two organizational schemes is better and to go forward with the expert's decision).

Teams have many opportunities to optimize their performance, two of the greatest lie in articulating the team members' complementary roles and defining what procedures the team will employ to complete its work. In both cases, members feel less anxiety, and when an environment reduces anxiety, the opportunity for cohesion increases. When members understand both their roles and the roles of others, conflict decreases and consequently productivity and group ownership increases. When members consistently employ processes that the team has constructed and see the positive outcomes of those procedures, team cohesion increases even more.

6.4 MANAGING TEAMWORK AT A DISTANCE

Many teams now work across time zones, borders, and continents. These types of teams, called "virtual teams," share some features with traditional teams, but they also demonstrate some unique characteristics that make them a special case for consideration. In its simplest form, a virtual team is simply a group of people who work together on a shared purpose but from different locations, using technology to facilitate communication. The types of teams can be the same as those specified earlier, but these teams are qualitatively different from traditional teams. First, the team members must be more self-motivated, and able to handle the challenges that technology sometimes presents. Second, they must be excellent communicators who can articulate needs and expectations very clearly because technology rarely enables the rich interpersonal cues of face-to-face communication. Finally, team members, often from different cultures and locations, need to trust each other without ever meeting or seeing each other. These concerns mirror many of those that "regular" teams face (e.g., clearly defining roles and processes), but the complexity added by distance, technology, and multiple cultures means that these types of teams need to consider a wider array of issues than teams that work in the same location. Three of these complexities, trust in virtual teams, sensitivity to cultural differences, and selecting appropriate communication tools, are discussed in detail below.

6.4.1 Building Trust in Virtual Teams

Trust represents the single most important factor in successful teams. However, due to the geographic and cultural differences present in virtual teams, establishing trust becomes significantly more difficult for those in virtual teams than those working in traditional teams. Challenges of "social presence," as this idea is called, arise from the relative lack of communication channels enabled by technological communication because people cannot see facial expressions or gestures and cannot hear verbal cues. Additionally, trust usually takes time to develop, and traditional teams have the opportunity to meet by chance, for example, and these chance meetings build trust and shared experiences.

However, virtual teams most frequently have no shared past and members come together for a specific purpose for a specific timeframe. Consequently, virtual team members have much less—or no—opportunity to demonstrate what are considered

behaviors that build trust, such as personal sharing or making oneself vulnerable to others by disclosing events unrelated to work. In response to this difficulty, researchers have developed some concepts to address how virtual teams build the trust necessary to successfully complete their assignments. The first is called "Swift Trust" and the second is called "Social Information Processing," and each points out a few guidelines for building virtual trust.

6.4.1.1 Swift Trust. *Swift trust* suggests that team members rely on prior team experiences and abstract understandings of teams to guide their actions in new team situations. Specifically, according to swift trust, team members must:

1. Enter a collaboration with a *predisposition to trust others* because trust is established in the very first moments of a virtual interaction. The trust is strengthened or weakened in subsequent interactions.
2. Rely on depersonalized *judgments of team members based upon their organizational roles* because the primary assumption is that each team member has been included for a particular reason.

6.4.1.2 Social Information Processing Theory. *Social information processing theory* suggests that successful virtual teams include both task-based and social-based information in the same messages. In other words, a team member might demonstrate concern about another's personal life in the same message that includes information about how the team is going to collaborate. Additionally, according to this research, virtual teams that perform the best communicate very frequently, provide consistent feedback on others' work, and alert others on the team in advance of unexpected behavior, such as absence from a scheduled meeting. Walther and Bunz propose six "rules" for successful teams:

1. *Get started right away.* Building trust in virtual teams requires time, and so groups must begin working on task-based elements at the same time they negotiate social elements.
2. *Communicate frequently.* Frequent communication helps to build the shared background lacking in virtual teams and helps disperse work among team members.
3. *Multitask, getting organized and doing substantive work simultaneously.* A modification of the first two rules, this point describes the type of communication that must occur from the beginning and claims that it must occur frequently.
4. *Overtly acknowledge that you have read one another's messages.* Because electronic media does not allow for nonverbal cues, teams must "over communicate" their understanding; it's difficult to know if another has read a message or not. Explicit recognition helps others know that you've read and understood their messages.

5. *Be explicit about what you are thinking and doing.* Similar to point four, explicitly articulating your ideas or thoughts eliminates the ambiguity of the medium. In face-to-face collaborations, we present our opinions in many nonverbal ways that others can read effectively. In electronic communication this is more difficult, so it requires explicitly verbalizing thoughts or proposed actions.
6. *Set deadlines and stick to them.* One of the best ways to demonstrate that you can be trusted is by sticking to deadlines. In an environment rife with ambiguity, performing as others expect makes individuals more credible. Further, when individuals demonstrate their reliability, others are more likely to demonstrate trust by coming to rely on others. This, in turn, builds more trust in the team.

These principles from the concept of swift trust and social information processing reveal complementary concerns. In the first case, people begin a collaboration with expectations and hopes about how others will perform and interact. The second case articulates some guidelines for acting in ways that build the trust necessary for successful teams.

6.4.2 Demonstrating Sensitivity to Cultural Differences

In our increasingly globalized world, team members often come from different cultures, races, religions, and ethnicities, and so success in a team requires understanding the varied backgrounds of those we work with. One of the challenges in discussing "cultural differences" is that *culture* can mean many things and represents a complex network of multiple factors that comprise an individual's cultural identity. It's helpful to think of culture using an iceberg metaphor, where we only see the most superficial aspects, or tip, of a person's identity: we don't know their history, education, beliefs, political preferences, or life experiences. All of these—and many more—contribute to what we call *culture*.

That said, there are some principles we can adopt to help us think about culture in its broadest sense. One of the most commonly used set of principles is presented by Hofstede in his book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. He includes these six "layers" of culture, which are admittedly only just the beginning of very complex distinctions:

1. *National level.* This concerns one's country of origin, whether one currently lives there, recently immigrated to another country, or feels historical ties to a particular country.
2. *Regional/ethnic and religious/linguistic.* Most countries include multiple regional, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. For example, in the United States, one could live in the Southeast, be African-American, a Muslim, and speak "standard edited English" (the purported "correct" dialect of American English).

3. *Gender.* People usually identify with one sex or the other, male or female, regardless of sexual orientation, though sexual orientation is often thought to be a subset of gender.
4. *Generation.* When a person was born contributes to their outlook on life, largely because of experiences they share. For example, in the United States, people might identify as "Baby Boomers," "Generation X," or "Millenials" and each has certain shared values and concerns.
5. *Social Class.* Class most often concerns a person's profession, education level, and income as well their prospects and opportunities to which they have access.
6. *Organizational/corporate.* People identify with groups they belong to, whether companies or other organizations, and each of those affiliations contributes to a person's outlook on the world and what they value.

In addition to thinking about culture as a layered set of concerns that make every individual unique, another approach is applying accepted frameworks that help people make useful generalizations about others. It's important to note that generalizations are only that—general—and should never be mistaken as encompassing the entire complexity of any individual. These useful generalizations offer only a starting point for thinking about interacting with others.

The most common of these frameworks is "High Context/Low Context." High context cultures typically foreground the importance of existing relationships and maintaining connections with a group. China and Japan are often cited as high context because of their historical belief in the value of collective action and group harmony. Low context cultures tend to rely more on individual action and demonstrate belief in written laws, regulations, and processes. The United States and Germany are typically cited as a low context cultures. While this concept of "high/low" most often refers to national origin, it can also be adapted in many ways—to ethnicities, religions, genders, organizations, or professions themselves—to discern how people might value relationships and explicit communications.

Finally, in their book *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, Linda Beamer and Iris Varner offer a series of questions that can help us understand cultures:

1. *In what ways do people learn about information and in what ways do they think?* For example, does a culture value experience more than reading? Does a culture think there are limits to knowledge?
2. *How do people understand the relationship between "doing" and "achievement?"* For example, does a culture focus more on the current moment or future-oriented activities? Are relationships or results more important? How does a group handle ambiguity?
3. *What is our place in the universe?* For example, are humans a part of nature or is our role to dominate it? What is the relationship of divinity (divinities) to human action? How is time understood, and is death a part of life or its end?

4. *What is the importance of the "self"?* For example, is the basic unit of society the individual or the group? Does equality exist and for whom? What role does age play?
5. *What are the ways groups are organized?* For example, can individuals move between groups, and are organizations hierarchical or horizontal? Are personal activities public or private?

These five topics represent just the surface of complexity necessary to understand another culture. However, they do point out that cultures that are different from our own have a coherent set of characteristics that we can identify if we ask the right questions. Most importantly, they demonstrate both the complexity of cultures and the individuals in them, and also that the only way to learn about others is to ask good questions. If we assume we know a group based on our prior knowledge of them, that's a stereotype, and stereotypes never withstand even the most superficial scrutiny. Using these questions to help form a useful generalization can act as a starting point for further questioning that recognizes the distinct diversity that individuals bring to our teams.

6.5 SELECTING COMMUNICATION TOOLS TO SUPPORT TEAMWORK

Because team members are often dispersed and yet work on the same documents, having a site where all team members can upload and modify documents in a streamlined manner is very important for a productive group. Many tools exist for enabling group collaboration, and new technologies for collaboration emerge all the time. Below, we provide an overview of two technologies that have a bit of history, wikis and SharePoint, and are often utilized in team settings (readers interested in full-length guides can find those readily available on the Internet).

6.5.1 Wikis

At the time of writing this manuscript, one of the fastest ways to establish an organized system for file storage is a wiki from the company *PBwork*s, available at the website www.pbworks.com.

PBworks allows teams to create and maintain their own collaborative website—a wiki—thereby offering a centralized and up-to-date place for coordinating group work. The wiki is a series of interlinked pages for which editing and viewing privileges are entirely controlled by (but not restricted to) administrators. By tracking all changes made to the wiki and reserving final editorial privileges for the specified administrators, PBworks facilitates moderating and safeguarding an ever-evolving information exchange. Moreover, it gives up to 2 GB of file-sharing/storing capacity for free, and has additional features such as automatic edit notification, page template construction, and both point-and-click and direct source editing for individual pages.

6.5.1.1 Creating a Wiki. To construct your own wiki, simply go to pbworks.com, click "create a wiki," invite users with the "Share this wiki" feature, and begin editing/uploading files. When creating a page, you are given the option of using a prefabricated template. Most of these are quite simple and are not likely to be of much use. However, after you have constructed a page of your own, you can save it as a new template for future page creation. To do this, use the "edit tags" feature to mark the page as "template" (case sensitive).

6.5.1.2 Editing. Editing is, for the most part, self-explanatory. Text can be copied and pasted from programs such as Microsoft Word while retaining most formatting such as italics, font size, and headings (e.g., Heading 1 will remain Heading 1 and will appear as such in a table of contents on the wiki, should you create one). However, other features of Microsoft Word (such as automatic numbering) are non-transferrable.

You can insert links, images, and plugins (e.g., YouTube video, table of contents, etc.) by using the appropriate feature in the editor. Links from one page of the wiki to another are also easy to create. Simply highlight some text and click on the appropriate page name in the "Insert Links" box. Finally, PBworks allows users to comment on pages, and so members of your team might leave explanations or suggestions for other team members.

There is also a comment feature that allows users to comment on a page, perhaps suggesting or explaining an edition.

6.5.1.3 Organizing. Your wiki will be searchable and one can view a complete list of pages at any time by clicking "view all pages." Nevertheless, it would be a good idea to utilize some of PBwork's organizing features. For example, folders can be created in which to store certain sets of pages. Creating a list of folders (with links) on the front page and putting a directory page in each folder will also simplify site navigation immensely. Aside from this, pages can be "tagged" and thereby associated with other pages, even when they are not in the same folder, without the need for creating individual, direct links.

6.5.1.4 Monitoring Edits. There is a link on each page to its edit history and users can subscribe to email notifications and/or RSS feeds to receive information about page updates. Aside from this, one can also go to "view all pages" and see a page listing the number of revisions for each page (click the number to see revision details). The page history gives a list of links to past revisions (noting, in particular, the time of each) with the additional option of comparing any two. It is worth noting, however, that this compare function only lists changes made to the content of a page, not the formatting. Administrators (and only administrators) can delete past revisions.

This leads to another point about privacy, user settings, and edit-control. Wiki users can be granted access to the wiki at any of five levels of control: Administrator, Editor, Writer, Reader, and Page-Level Only (each one receiving fewer privileges than the former). For details on each, see the "user settings" page on your wiki. There

the administrators can also, at any time, view and change the permission level of any given user.

6.5.1.5 Other Suggestions for Wiki Use. You can use your wiki simply to coordinate a project so that everyone has access to an up-to-date version of group efforts. However, you are not limited to this. You can also use your wiki to schedule meetings, provide links to pertinent outside information, share files, discuss/track progress, and/or assign tasks to individual group members.

Most answers to questions about PBworks can easily be found in the searchable user's manual at http://usermanual.pbworks.com/.

6.5.2 SharePoint

SharePoint is a Microsoft product that provides a collaborative workspace. The term "SharePoint" actually refers to two products, Microsoft Office SharePoint Server and Windows SharePoint Services. Other tools, including email, might also be a part of your system.

There are two primary parts to SharePoint: lists and pages. Much like a wiki, these two functions enable you to create a collaborative website on which you can store and share documents, schedule events, conduct surveys, and more. You can then manage this site and control the editing/viewing privileges of all users. Moreover, SharePoint allows users to stay updated with alerts (whether on-site or by email).

6.5.2.1 Lists. A list, as its name implies, is information arranged in list format. However, lists incorporate more functions than might be expected. For example, by means of lists, one can create file-sharing libraries, calendars, discussion boards, etc. Unfortunately, SharePoint complicates matters with its terminology. Although SharePoint only directly refers to a select few things as "lists" (e.g., task and issues lists), it is important to note that *all* SharePoint content is arranged in lists. Document libraries, surveys, and discussion boards, although nominally different, are still essentially lists. Keeping this in mind is essential, because all SharePoint lists are managed and edited in the same way, whether officially deemed "list" or not. Regardless of nomenclature, lists are the organizing structures of SharePoint.

Each list can be edited by whomever an administrator chooses. For example, a document library may be available for addition to any site user, while a discussion board is available to only certain, specified individuals. Moreover, for each particular list, an administrator may specify in detail what each user is able to do when editing. For example, you may wish to create an announcement page to which all users have the ability to add content, but from which only select users have the ability to remove it. Content approval by administrators may also be required, if so desired. To change these and all other list settings, go to "Site Settings" at the top of your page and select "Modify Site Content" under "Customization."

To create a new list, you have three options: go to "Create List" in the "Actions" menu, "Create" on the "Documents and Lists" page, or "Create New Content" on the

"Modify Site Content" page. Regardless, you will end up on the "Create Page," where you will find a series of options from which to choose in creating your list. Below is an overview of each:

A *Document Library* is a space for sharing or storing files (e.g., photos, Microsoft Word documents, or Excel spreadsheets). By default, your SharePoint site should have three document libraries: My Pages, Private Documents, and Shared Documents. However, you can create as many new libraries as you like. A unique feature of SharePoint document libraries is the "check-out" function. If your group is collaborating on a single document, you can store it and make it available for group editing in a SharePoint document library. However, to prevent multiple people from editing a document at the same time, SharePoint allows you to "check out" a file from the library. When a file is checked out, other users will be notified that it is being edited and will have access to a read-only copy of the file. To check a file out, place your cursor over the document title, click the box that appears, and find the option, "Check Out." Once you have checked it out, you can open the file for editing and it will remain checked out until you check it back in (via the same process by which you checked it out). If you are using Microsoft Word, Excel, or other Microsoft Office Suite programs to edit your file, you will be reminded to check it in when you try to exit the program.

Announcement Lists, as their name suggests, allow you to list announcements. The list consists of simple announcement titles on which a user can click to see the full announcement.

Contacts Lists allow you to maintain a current list of phone numbers, email addresses, etc. for those associated with your project. There are default settings for the kinds of information kept in the list, but you can modify them by clicking "Modify settings and columns" in the Actions menu. To change or delete a category (i.e., column) in the list, click where it is listed in the columns section of the page. From this page you can also add or change the order of columns (by clicking the relevant link under "Columns") or change what columns are shown on the default list page (by clicking "All Contacts" under "Views"). Any information not shown on the default list page will be shown in detail when one clicks a particular name.

Events Lists are calendars. They can be viewed in either list view ("All Events" in the "Select a View" menu) or in the more familiar calendar format. As with the Contacts Lists above (and all other lists, for that matter) you can change the kinds of information recorded for events by adding/editing the columns of the list. A particularly useful feature of SharePoint calendars is the ability to have regularly recurring events. When you create an event, you will be asked to specify the recurrence rate. This way, you avoid having to manually enter weekly meetings, etc.

Task Lists allow you to list, prioritize, and assign tasks to individual group members, as well as keep track of the progress of each.

Issues Lists are quite similar to task lists. Differentiate between the two as you see fit.

A *Custom List* is really just a blank list, without any preset columns. By going to "Modify Columns and Settings," though, you can modify the settings to accommodate whatever kind of list you might envision.

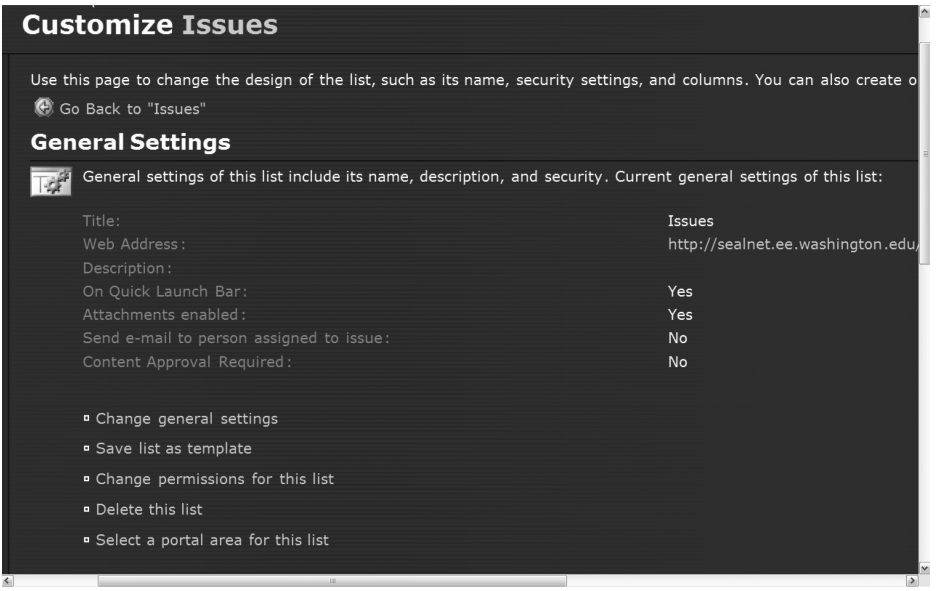

Figure 6.1. Screen shot of SharePoint

Custom Lists created in Datasheet View are exactly the same as ordinary custom lists. However, after creating it you will be taken to a "datasheet" view of the list modeled after Microsoft Access. In fact, you can switch between ordinary, "standard" view and "datasheet" view at any time with any list; it does not have to be created in the Datasheet view. The link to do so will be at the top of the list, next to "New Item," "Filter," etc.

The *Import Spreadsheet* function, as its name indicates, allows you to import a spreadsheet when you want to create a list that has the same columns and contents as an existing spreadsheet. Importing a spreadsheet requires a spreadsheet application compatible with Windows SharePoint Services.

Discussion Boards allow you to create a forum (in either threaded or flat view) for group discussion.

Finally, *Surveys* are lists that allow you to easily poll the members of your group. You can then view the results graphically or individually. The surveys can be multi-questioned and are optionally anonymous.

As a general example for lists, Figure 6.1 shows the customization page of a list made from the "Issues" template. To get to this page, follow the "Modify Columns and Settings" link on the particular list you wish to edit. Note that deleting a list must be done from this page. As you can see, from this page one can change the settings and permissions for the list. If you wished to limit the editing capabilities of users to only those list items created by them, for example, you would go to "Change general settings" and change the "Item level permissions." You would do likewise to require content approval by an administrator. On the other hand, if you wished to specify the

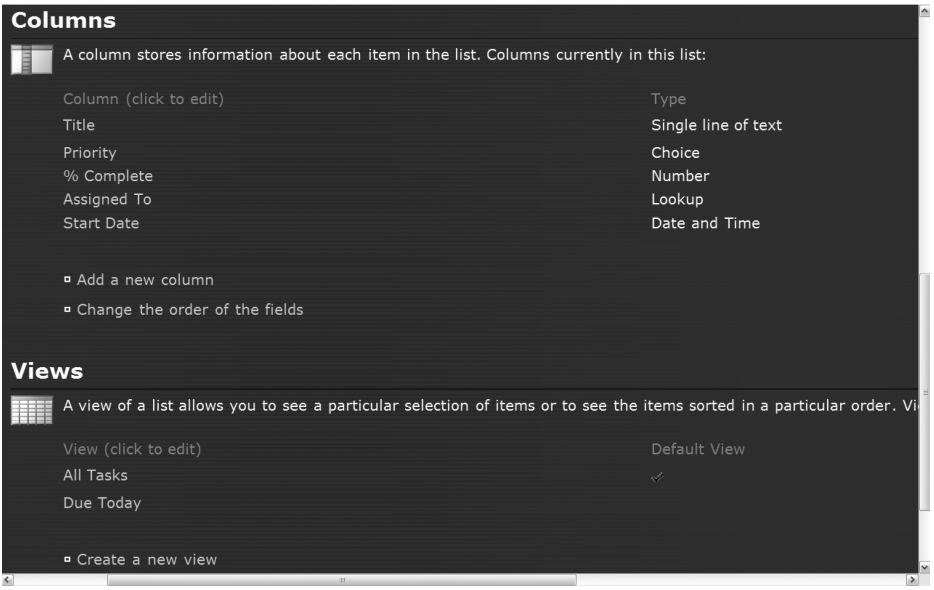

Figure 6.2. Continuing screen shot of SharePoint

reading and editing permissions of individuals or groups of individuals you would go to the "Change permissions for this list" page.

Figure 6.2 continues the page and we see where the list format itself can be edited.

The list consists of columns, which are the categories in which information is stored. There are several types of categories, depending on what kind of information is being stored. As seen above, this list utilizes five types of information storage: single line of text, (multiple) choice, number, lookup (i.e., find/select information already on the site), and date and time. However, you are in no way limited to these. For example, if you wished to associate a particular website with each issue in the list, you could add another column, formatted as a "hyperlink" column.

Views determine how a given list is displayed. In Figure 6.2, there are two: one view displays all issues while the other displays only issues that need addressing today (this view actually requires a "due date" column, which has been deleted in this example). As with the columns above, new views can be created so that your information can be sorted and displayed in any way you like. For example, if you had an issue list of such length that finding your own issues became a hassle, you could create a new view with a filter that only shows issues assigned and/or created by you.

6.5.2.2 Web Pages. Web pages can be created in SharePoint to increase accessibility to your lists or for adding content that does not fit neatly into a list. To create a web page, go to the same "Create" page described above under "Lists." At the bottom of this page you will find three options:

- *Basic Pages* are ordinary web pages to which you can add text, pictures, and tables using your browser.
- *Web Part Pages* are pages in which there are multiple, embedded web pages, or "Web Parts." These allow you to have multiple boxes, each independent of the others, on a single page. In these boxes (parts) you can display any lists you have created as well as non-list content. With regard to the latter, SharePoint gives you several options: you may add photos; create your own content (with either a Rich Text or Source Editor); even embed other, outside websites. These web parts can be easily added, moved around the page, or edited by selecting the appropriate link in the drop-down menu when you click "Modify Shared Page" in the upper-right corner of your Web Part Page.
- *Sites and Workspaces* are additional SharePoint sites, independent of the parent site, which function much like the Web Part Pages above, although the templates are different.

6.5.2.3 Alerts and Site Management. To keep up to date, you may wish to create alerts for specific parts of your SharePoint site. To do this, go to the Documents and Lists page and navigate to the appropriate aspect of your site you wish to monitor. There are essentially two types of alerts: List Alerts and List Item Alerts. The former notifies you when an entire list is altered, while the latter allows you to monitor a particular aspect of the list (e.g., a particular discussion in the discussion board list). Note that web pages are also list items (in the "My Pages" list).

Managing the site is really a matter of managing the site lists. To do this, go to the Modify Site Content page and select the appropriate list. This will take you to a page from which you can change list properties: for example, add/change "columns," add/change "views" (ways in which the list is displayed), change editing permissions, save list as template, delete list, etc.

SharePoint is a great program for collaborative authoring, and experienced users find it very effective. The prior description provides only the skeleton of the program, and so readers who are interested in learning more about SharePoint can consult any of the following links:

- A fairly extensive, 75-page SharePoint tutorial: http://www.sharepointcustomization.com/resources/tutorials/
- Links to websites provided by Microsoft to assist SharePoint users: http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/sharepointtechnology/CH011424561033.aspx
- Training. This page gives you access to various training tutorials on such topics as working with lists, managing user permissions, working with picture libraries, etc.: http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/sharepointtechnology/CH011424521033.aspx
- User Documentation and Resources. This page is essentially an online help page. On it, you can find details about particular list templates, customizing sites, etc.: http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/sharepointtechnology/CH011593601033.aspx

EXERCISES

Exercise 6.1. Reflect on your experience with team work and list your strengths as well as your areas for improvement. Now consult with a co-worker/team mate and ask that person to rate you in the same way. Compare your lists and discuss ways that you can become a better team member.

Exercise 6.2. Conduct an Internet search on the two terms 1) "groupthink" and 2) "conflict resolution." Outline the principles of each term and present those to your manager/team leader and discuss ways that you can avoid the first and improve the second in your own team(s).

Exercise 6.3. For a current team of which you are a member, craft a communication plan that outlines when to communicate, how you'll communicate, and methods for making decisions. Share this with your team leader first, and ask that you be allowed to pilot the plan with your teammates. After using the articulated structures for two weeks, discuss with your team leader the improvements (and challenges) made to your team.

Exercise 6.4. Implement the six rules of Social Information Processing in a virtual team. After two weeks of using these processes, discuss with your team leader the improvements (and challenges) to your team that SIP provided.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Beamer, Linda and Varner, Iris (2001). *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Fisher, Roger and Ury, William (1981). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. New York: Penguin Books.

Hofstede, Geert (2005). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Jarvenpaa, S. L. and Leidner, D. E. (1999). Communication and trust in global virtual teams. *Organization Science*, 10(6), 791–815.

Katzenbach, J. R. and Smith, D. K. (1993). *The Wisdom of Teams*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Walther, Joseph B. and Bunz, Ulla (2005). The rules of virtual groups: trust, liking and performance in computer mediated communication. *Journal of Communication* (55.4): 828–846.