Working in Teams

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Why Teamwork is Important

Do you remember the vehicle you learned to drive in? I certainly do. How could I forget the Smurf? The Smurf was a blue 1979 Ford F-350 with a dumping bed. By the time I got around to driving it, it had already served a couple decades as a work truck in my dad's road construction business. I had many adventures in that truck during the summers I spent working for my dad. We had multiple breakdowns, and one time the carburetor even caught on fire (fun fact: Professor Bosshardt was with me when the fire happened). However, all of these mechanical difficulties were usually relatively simple to fix. You could open the hood and see most of the essential mechanical parts that needed repair.

Many years later, the spark plugs in my 2004 Mazda MPV were misfiring and needed to be replaced. Unfortunately, I was not able to do the repairs myself because although actually replacing the spark plug is pretty simple, getting to the spark plug required removing several mechanical components and lifting the engine out of the car.

My 2004 Mazda is definitely more complex than the 1979 Ford "Smurf" was, and vehicles aren't the only thing that has gotten more complex over the years. Nearly every industry becomes more and more complex as time passes. One of the things driving this complexity is pressure to improve performance. For example, my Mazda, though not as fun to drive, is incredibly more fuel efficient and reliable than the Smurf ever was.

Another driver of complexity is automation. More and more of the simple tasks in the world are being done by computers and machines. As our world becomes more complex, so must our methods for solving problems. As Einstein said, "The world that we have made as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far creates problems that we cannot

solve at the same level as the level we created them."[1] For example, as cars become more complex, mechanics need to rely more and more on computer analytics, manufacturer manuals, and teammates to make repairs. This pattern repeats for all sorts of issues—complex problems require more than the expertise of one person.

There is a popular axiom that says, "If all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."[2] Essentially, this means there is a strong temptation for people to try to solve problems with the theories and tools they know well, but those theories and tools may not be the best for the job. Corey Phelps, author and Strategy Professor at McGill University, described this phenomenon and said that the solution is that "collaboration becomes fundamentally important. And collaboration starts with the recognition that I don't have all of the tools, all of the knowledge in me to effectively solve this. So, I need to recruit people that can actually help me."[3]

Thus, teamwork is essential to solving complex problems. Just as modern cars require that mechanics do more than just look under the hood and make repairs, those who solve problems in the 21st century need to rely on more than just their own knowledge and experiences. They need to collaborate with teams. This chapter is written to help you do teamwork effectively.

Teamwork Roles and Responsibilities

As you work in teams both in school and out of school, one of the most important things to do is assign roles and responsibilities to each teammate. As the popular saying goes, "If something is everyone's responsibility, it is no one's responsibility."

Here are some common roles found on successful teams:

[1] Dass, R. (1976). *The only dance there is.* New York: J Aronson. pg 38

[2] Maslow, A. H. (1974). *The psychology of science: A reconnaissance.* New York: Harper and Row. pg 16

[3] The Right Way to Solve Complex Business Problems [Audio blog interview]. (2018, December 4). Retrieved January 17, 2019, from https://hbr.org/ideacast/2018/12/the-right-way-to-solve-complex-business-problems.html

- **The MC**: This person guides the conversation and ensures that the group stays on task during meetings. They keep the group from spending too much time on tangents and finds ways to keep the conversation moving.

- **Notetaker**: This person keeps track of the conversation and usually sends a recap (often called minutes) to the rest of the group at the conclusion of the meeting.

- **Coordinator**: This person schedules meetings, tracks assignments, prepares agendas, and submits completed work.

- **Devil's Advocate**: This person is charged with finding potential flaws in what the group is putting together.

- **Peacemaker**: This person is responsible to make sure that conversations are respectful and inclusive.

  Each team is going to be unique so take the list above and adjust as needed.

Regardless of how roles are assigned, each team member should be expected to:

- Speak respectfully

- Be on time to meetings and with assignments

- Be prepared for meetings and discussions

- Help teammates be successful

Managing Team Conflict

Even if your team has clear roles and responsibilities, and everyone is doing their part to help the team succeed, you will inevitably have conflict on your team. If managed well, this conflict can be a good thing. If not managed well, it can lead to the team's failure. Remember the story of goldilocks where one bowl of porridge was too hot, another was too cold, but she finally found the one that was just right? That is how you want to look at conflict on your team. Most people recognize the dangers of too much conflict. People's feelings get hurt, and more time gets spent fighting than getting the work done.

Many people fail to realize though that too little conflict can also be dangerous. In fact, remember earlier in this chapter when we said that complex problems require multiple

perspectives? If your team never has conflict, that probably means that those with unique perspectives are probably not speaking up.

How do you get to Goldilocks level of conflict? The key is to make sure you have an environment where ideas are shared freely, yet respectfully. Here are some tips to help your team do just that:

- Keep all disagreements based on the decision at hand

- Don't make it personal

- Encourage those who disagree to speak up (they can't get in trouble for doing something they were asked to do)

- Express your disagreements, but after a decision has been made, be supportive

Respectful Disagreement

Disagreeing respectfully is not easy to do. It goes against our biological wiring. Our bodies are built to respond to danger by pulling blood and oxygen from our brain to our muscles and vital organs so we can more effectively fight or flee. When encountered with ideas we disagree with, our bodies produce the hormones that trigger this response. This means that when we are in an argument, we quite literally can't think straight because our body is depriving our brain of oxygen. Thus, respectful disagreement takes thoughtful and deliberate practice. Here are a few habits that can help you show respect to ideas that you initially disagree with strongly:

- **Use the "yes, and" technique**: This methodology, made popular by improv comedy groups, replaces negativity in brainstorming by replacing "no" with "yes, and" followed by a suggestion that improves the idea.[4] It keeps dialogue going because rather than dismissing ideas outright, someone can take ideas they disagree with and make suggestions to make them more plausible.

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[4] Kohrman, M. (2014, October 18). Yes, And… Improv Techniques To Make You A Better Boss. Retrieved January 17, 2019, from https://www.fastcompany.com/3024535/yes-and-improv-techniques-to-make-you-a-better-boss

- **Put yourself in their shoes**: In his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie explains that one way you can always show respect for someone else's idea is to say, "If I were you, I would feel the same way." After all, if you also had the sum of that person's life experiences, chances are that you would probably think the same way the other person does.[5] Showing empathy for the other person's position often makes them more willing to listen to your perspective as well.

- **Make generous assumptions**: In their book *Crucial Conversations*, the consultants at VitalSmarts point out that in every interaction there are gaps in our observations that need to be filled with assumptions before we can make conclusions about a situation.[6] One way to show more respect is to default to positive assumptions. Before getting angry with someone, sincerely ask yourself, "Why would a reasonable, rational person think that way?" This thought exercise can help you to be more generous and respectful to others.

Conclusion

As time passes, we can all count on the problems we face to become more and more complex. As that happens, it becomes more and more important for us all to work together. By investing in good teamwork practices in college, you will be more prepared to become the kind of collaborative problem solver this world needs.

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[5] Carnegie, D. (1936) *How to win friends and influence people.* Pocket Books
[6] Patterson, K. Grenny, J. McMillan, R. Switzler, A. (2012) *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York; McGraw-Hill