Objectives: As technical professionals, you will often work in team settings. This section will look at teamwork, negotiation, and conflict resolution. By the end of this lesson, you should have a sound understanding of:

- the essence of teamwork and small group communication;
- skills for negotiation; and
- principles for managing or resolving conflict.
The essence of teamwork

A team can range from just two people to a virtual team of over 100. A team is a collaboration of a number of individuals, all of whom may come from a different social, cultural, ethical viewpoint. In business, teams are formed to achieve organisational goals or work on specific organisational tasks. Teams or groups can be formal (established by management) or informal (not formally established, but meets regularly about work) (Dwyer, 2002, p.433). Dwyer suggests that “the key identifiers of a team are that members are operating within a charter; they see themselves as having specified roles; and they see the team as accountable for achieving specified organisational goals” (2002, p.433).

A coherent, well-managed team is often accepted as being more productive than an individual, but this is dependent upon a number of factors, such as support for the group and personal competencies of members. The benefits of teamwork include the diversity of experience and backgrounds of team members; the ability to brainstorm, discuss and informally peer review; and the ability to involve a number of people in a decision-making process. The disadvantages of teamwork are that when dysfunctional, a group can be quite destructive for individuals, and at an institutional level. It can also be difficult for individual achievement to be recognised, and may take longer for a decision to be reached than if working with an individual.

Teams can be formally managed, or conducted in a self-managed format. Technology-oriented industries have tended to encourage self-managed teams; however, the effectiveness of this form of team management has been hotly debated, due to the role of leadership. Leadership is often acknowledged as being the basis of success for many teams. Seiler and Bell define leadership as “an influence process that includes any behaviour that helps clarify or guide the group to achieve its goals” (2002, p.448). They suggest that team leaders must perform the following functions:

- initiating;
- organising;
- maintaining effective interaction;
- ensuring member satisfaction;
- facilitating understanding;

In self-managed teams, this leadership can be replaced by an established clear direction and set of common goals. Wageman, who conducted research with Xerox Corporation Customer Service Teams, notes seven critical success factors for self-managed teams:

- clear, engaging direction;
- a real team task;
- rewards for team excellence;
• basic material resources;
• authority to manage work;
• team goals;
• team norms that promote strategic thinking (in Dwyer, 2002, p.433).

Some teams establish a mission statement (what our team is, and what we are going to do) as well as a set of behavioural standards. An example of a set of team rules (led or self-managed) that establish behavioural expectations could be:

• respect other people’s opinions, even if you don’t agree with them;
• imagine yourself in the other person’s shoes before you cast any judgement;
• be honest, yet tactful;
• accept that there will always be different approaches to a problem;
• treat one another with respect and courtesy;
• respect each another’s personal commitments and life;
• let each other know where you are;
• our basic working hours are 10 am - 3 pm - outside that, it’s your call.

Sounds simple, but it’s amazing how affective something like this can be. For example, you might be working in a team that consists of developers or designers who work until all hours of the morning. Is it reasonable to expect them in at work at 8 am? You do need to meet up with one another during the day, but establishing hours when everyone is expected to be present may prevent resentment later down the track, and sets clear boundaries.

The essence of successful teamwork is based around good communication, and in a team environment, honesty and openness is particularly important. The challenge is to manage openness with tact and discretion.

Small group communication

An understanding of the principles of small group communication is important, because technical development environments often revolve around group work within project settings. You will very rarely be required to work in isolation; even if you are called in as a consultant or work from home, you work will be generated and managed within a team scenario. It is, therefore, vitally important that you understand group dynamics.

There are a number of roles that may emerge within a group. These are:
• Pragmatiser - practical solutions, expedient, utilitarian
• Philosopher - group conscience keeper, focuses on ethics, issue prober
• Conceptualiser - thinks in abstract, groups similar looking data and contrasts it with extraneous data
• Planner - pushes for well-defined objectives, structures problems, keeper of the group’s agenda
• Energiser - enthusiastic, sees the problem as attainable if the group energetically pursues it, group cheerleader (Cragan and Wright, 1986, p.238).
Benne and Sheats suggest that roles can be split up into:

- group task roles (task-oriented, e.g. coordinator, recorder, or information seeker);
- group building and maintenance roles (group-oriented, e.g. harmoniser, standard-setter); and

It is important for small group management as both a leader and individual that you are aware of potential differences, and learn how to cope with them. Seiler and Bell suggest that successful group outcomes “depend on group-centred attitudes and behaviours, which enhance participation and member satisfaction; they include open-mindedness, a positive attitude, the ability to listen, a willingness to contribute, and preparation” (2002, p.455).

**Negotiation**

Whenever there is more than one opinion or viewpoint, negotiation is required if an outcome is to be achieved. Negotiation is therefore “a process in which two or more parties try to resolve differences, solve problems, and reach agreement” (Dwyer, 2002, p.111). In coming to an agreement, the aim of negotiation should be to come to a position that will mutually benefit both parties. However, this is often not the case, and negotiation is referred to in terms of ‘win-win’ or ‘win-lose’. In order for negotiation to be successful, all involved parties must be motivated to reach agreement.

Individuals have different methods of negotiating. Dwyer suggests that negotiation style and the personal qualities of negotiators affect relationships and the likelihood of success, and asserts the following as personal qualities of a good negotiator:

- ability to plan;
- capacity to think clearly under stress;
- ability to be practical;
- capacity to communicate well;
- competency in their subjects;
- ability to act assertively and with integrity;
- ability to identify the interests of each party;
- capacity to identify standards;
- willingness to follow up (2002, p.112-113).

As professional communicators, we are most interested in achieving the ability to communicate well - that is, to listen, interpret, understand context, and express our own views in a way that is understood as it was intended by our audience. You will
need to be aware of psychological barriers that may appear during negotiation. These are:

- “fear of being taken for a ride;
- guilt about wanting to be assertive;
- feeling intimidated by so-called powerful people;
- fear of losing face with the boss or colleagues;
- wanting to be liked;
- need to be ‘nice’;
- fear of conflict or confrontation;

If you are aware of these barriers, you are in a better position to address them by communicating in a way that will ease or remove them.

There are a number of negotiating styles that can be adopted by an individual or team of negotiators. Kilmann and Thomas (1975) categorised negotiating styles as follows:

- Competing (forcing) - not willing to compromise beliefs in order to reach settlement/usually involved in struggle for leadership.
- Accommodating (smoothing) - willing to set aside own views to reduce tension/cooperate with those in power or who have expert knowledge.
- Avoiding (withdrawal) - stay low, unassertive and uncooperative/usually don’t have a firm belief or opinion on the problem/little organizational power
- Collaborating (problem-solving)
- Compromising (sharing)

Successful negotiators generally work on a compromising or collaborative negotiating style (Cragan and Wright, 1986, p.243). One method used in this method of negotiation is that of ‘Rogerian argument’, which is ‘an argument strategy designed not to win but to increase communication in both directions’ (Flower, 1985, p.179). Rogerian argument is based around the following: “Before you present your position and argue for your way of seeing things, you must be able to describe your listener’s position back to your listener in such a way that he or she agrees with your version of it...you are demonstrating that you not only care about your listener’s perspective but care enough to actively try (and keep trying) to understand it” (Flower, 1985, p.80).

Collaborating or compromising styles are the only styles that can potentially result in a win-win scenario. All others will result in one side walking away with a loss. The style adopted will depend upon the position of the negotiator. For example, you may have designed a new housing material that is much more energy efficient than those being built by your company. However, it is much more expensive to build. You need to negotiate with your employer, asking them to consider using your design. Prior to negotiation, you need to consider your ‘loss position’, that is, what you are prepared to lose. If you are that convinced that your design is a winner, and the only way to go, you may be prepared to lose your job and subsequently open your own business or offer the design elsewhere. This will affect how you negotiate.
Managing conflict

Conflict in a working environment is a fact of life. You are not going to be happy about absolutely everything all the time, nor are your colleagues. Conflict, however, is not necessarily a bad thing, and when managed well, can work to enhance relationships. In fact, Lockyer and Kaczmarek identify the problem of ‘groupthink’ in an environment where conflict is never expressed: “Groupthink is the tendency for groups to put such a high premium on agreement that they directly or indirectly punish dissent”, and they suggest that organisations or groups suffering from groupthink fail to see possible alternatives (2001, p.364).

A range of factors can produce conflict. These may include differences of opinion, lack of consideration for peers, and or simply misunderstanding. While conflict can arise when least expected, there are recognised personality types that may increase the potential for conflict within a group. These are:

- Aggressor - abrasive and overly dominant;
- Doormat - submissive, lack of confidence;
- Egghead - parade their intelligence, think others are beneath them;
- Airhead - tend to preface statements with ‘I don’t understand’; and
- Whiner - socially immature, always negative (Cragan and Wright, 1986, p.241)

You don’t need all of these types, or even one, to produce conflict, but a knowledge of their existence and an understanding of their motives can help you formulate strategies as to how best cope with a personality that you know will be destructive to your meeting, discussion, or work.

Skills for conflict management

Confrontation is an aggressive word - ‘addressing the issue’ is probably a better way of looking at conflict management. Some people enjoy conflict, while others avoid conflict at all costs. A happy medium is good.

Think of your last conflict. How did it start? Was it about the person or the issue? Was the conflict resolved to everyone's satisfaction? If not, reflect on how you have handled it differently.

One of the best ways to manage conflict is to see it coming. You should be aware of verbal and non-verbal signs - for example, indication that a team member is unhappy, aggravated or that two members are particularly antagonistic towards one another. Once aware of potential conflict, you need to decide on what action to take. In this instance, Donohue and Kolt (in Dwyer) argue that there are three decisions that must be made:

- whether to confront;
- when to confront; and
Your decision to confront will ultimately be based on whether resolution of the issue important for the future of the relationship of the parties, and how you address the issue will also be influenced by this relationship. Lockyer and Kaczmarek suggest five steps to conflict resolution:

1. make sure that the people involved really disagree;
2. check to see that everyone’s information is correct;
3. discover the needs each person is trying to meet;
4. search for alternatives;
5. repair bad feelings (2007, pp.311 - 312).

You should also visit the website of The Conflict Resolution Network (www.crnhq.org) and refer to the 12 Skills of Conflict Resolution. This is a valuable resource, and addresses many important points of relevance. If you do have to ‘address an issue’, consider the following points:

- embrace and value diversity and a different point of view;
- have empathy for a different perspective;
- always respect the dignity of other parties;
- be an active listener;
- be assertive, not aggressive; and
- let issues lie - once resolved, don’t forget (i.e. learn), but do move on.

We have now completed our modules on interpersonal communication, and will be looking at information management in our next lesson. You should now do the required reading and complete the exercise for this lesson.

REFERENCES


EXERCISE 8

Observe a Group. Analyse the dynamics of the group and submit no more than two pages on your findings. Your responses should be full sentences, answering the following questions:

• Who is the leader? Is there more than one?
• How well do members interact?
• Do you sense tension? How? From which member(s)?
• Do conflicts arise? Are they resolved? How?
• Do you see evidence of groupthink?
• How did the group make decisions? How did each member contribute?
• Overall, how successful do you think the group was? Why?
• Could the group dynamics have been more competently handled? How?

Internal students should submit this exercise to their tutor in class. External students should submit this with Assignment 2 in Week 12.

Note that at this stage, punctuation and grammar is increasingly important, and your submissions will be failed/discounted if they do not meet basic grammatical standards. If you are having problems, you should contact your tutor (internal students) or the Course Coordinator (external students).

VISIT THE WWW SITE

You should now visit the course website to access web-based links and readings, and to discuss any thoughts you have on this lesson. The website address is in your course profile, or can be accessed via http://ecourses.cqu.edu.au