Working In Teams - Communication

Introduction

The production of software in industry and commerce is almost wholly done by teams of programmers (software developers). The effective functioning of the team as a group of people working towards the same goal has been found to be as important as their technical competence. Many projects have come to grief not because the people concerned were not able and competent as programmers, but because interpersonal conflicts and/or poor communication lead to the making of poor decisions.

In this part of the course I wish to highlight a small part of the potential problems. Probably nothing of what I will say will be new to you. Most people are aware of the interpersonal factors that play a part in any team work. What I want to establish is the thought that it is possible for every one of us to improve his/her interpersonal communications. I must however make it clear at the beginning that the responsibility for learning is yours. You can't learn from theory alone, this handout will make no difference, on its own, to your performance in teams. It is up to you to apply it and learn from your own experience of real life.

Personal Needs and Goals

For any team to work effectively together the personal needs and goals of each of its members must be in some way fulfilled through the team goal. Each member of the team will have different strengths and weaknesses, each member of the team will have different personal goals. When decisions are taken within the team about who does what, it is essential that team is aware of each other's needs. Good communication is an essential first step to making such decisions. Communication between people is not as simple as it may first appear and to understand it some awareness of the needs and goals of others is necessary.

There are many personal goals that need to be satisfied, and the need to communicate with others will almost certainly be one. There are many experiences of how devastating social isolation can be. Human beings may have a fundamental need for social contact stemming from an anxiety of being separate, alone and mortal. In some senses it might be argued that communication enables a person, or some part of a person, to transcend mortality as, through its means, fragments of a person's experience may live on in the minds of others.

There however many other personal needs and goals, many of which should be recognised as playing a role in what happens in team work :-

1. The **need to belong**. The need to be part of something worthwhile, and bigger than oneself.

2. The **need to contribute**. The need for the satisfaction of knowing that what one has done has made a significant contribution to the work in hand.

3. The **need for status and recognition**. The need to have the recognition from others of your worth and value to the work.

4. The **need for acceptance and affection**. The need to know that you as a person are accepted with all your faults, and liked by others.

5.   The **need for self-fulfilment**. The need to be creative, to realise fully one's own intellectual potential.

6.   The **need for safety**. The need to feel secure, and know that your position and ability to satisfy other needs is not threatened.

All these needs play a part in any interpersonal communication within a team. Thus to understand the communication fully one has to interpret not only the explicit content of the communication, but also the implicit content much of which will be directed at satisfying one or more of these personal goals.

Communication.

Although the meaning of any technical communication may be quite clear from the words used, most communications between people carry other messages which relate more to personal needs that to technical discussion. The meaning of such messages can not be determined by the words alone. There are many other factors that need to be integrated with the words before their true meaning can be decoded. Quite often there is more than one message. To understand the full meaning of what someone has said, the following factors also need to be considered:-

1.   The **tone of voice** used. Voice tone alone can be used to imply pity, scorn, love, hate, etc.

2.   The **style of speech**. An anxious person will hesitate more, and introduce more 'ums' and 'ers' for example.

3.   The **choice of words** and expressions, can be used to imply for example that the person was just stupid not to have understood this point. Or conversely the deliberate use of highly technical terminology can be used to imply that the speaker is an expert in this field and his view should be given more weight.

4.   **Facial expression** provides a rich and complex set of signals that can be superimposed on different words to subtly change their meaning.

5.   **Gestures** of the hands and arms in particular can also convey information.

6.   The **spatial separation** between people, and the way in which it changes with time give quite clear messages of how well people are working together.

7.   **Posture** and stance carry their own messages. How somebody sits in a chair alters as their mood and feelings change.

8.   **Context**. The meaning of certain communications changes depending upon the setting in which they occur.

Encouraging Communication

It would be pointless for me to try an explain the meaning of these many and varied ways in which people communicate with each other as many studies have shown that people automatically interpret these verbal and non-verbal messages and respond to them, in many cases without being consciously aware of doing so. I have highlighted them as they can be helpful clues to understanding others if you become more consciously aware of them.   They are not in themselves sufficient to improve communications.

The key to improving communication with others is relatively simple to state, but unfortunately it is not something that I can teach, it is something that you can only learn for yourself. To improve communication between yourself and others you must learn how to love them and yourselves more. This involves learning to do a number of things which may not come easily. These are the learning's that I have found helpful in improving real communication between myself and others (originally stated by the psychotherapist Carl.R.Rogers "*On Becoming a Person*" (2004)):-

1. **Being Genuine**. I have found that it does not help, in the long run, to act as though I were something I am not. It does not help to act calm and pleasant when actually I am angry and critical. Most of my mistakes in communication can be accounted for in terms of the fact that I have, for some defensive reason, behaved in one way at a surface level, while in reality my feelings run in a contrary direction.

2. **Self-Acceptance**. I find I can be more effective when I can listen to myself with acceptance. It is important to realise when I am angry, or that I feel bored, or when I feel warmth and affection for somebody. It is only by accepting my feelings for somebody that I can change them and hence be more able to accept their feelings in response.

3. **Empathy**. I have found it of great value when I can permit myself to understand another. Our first reaction to people is often an immediate evaluation or judgement, rather than an understanding of them. When someone expresses some feeling or belief, our tendency is, almost immediately, to feel "that's right"; or "that's stupid"; "that's unreasonable". Very rarely do we permit ourselves to understand precisely what the feeling means for the other. We fear that if we really understood another, that we would be changed by the experience, and we all fear change.

4. **Acceptance**. I have found it rewarding to accept another person. It is not easy to truly accept another person and their feelings and beliefs, particularly if their feelings are hostile or angry towards me, or even if their feelings are positive and affectionate. It is essential to be able to accept that each of us is different, each of us has a different experience of life, and each of us has interpreted that in different ways. I have no right to say that my beliefs, attitudes, and interpretation is any better than anyone else's.

Inherent in the above beliefs is a fundamental belief that we all are by nature thoroughly good, intelligent and loveable, that only accumulated emotional pain and misinformation stand in the way of each of us realising our full potential, and that we can only realise our full potential through relationships with others.

Working In Teams

An exercise in Listening

Divide up into groups of three as far as possible. Select one person to talk, one to listen, and one to observe.

(a)   The Talker should try to communicate to the Listener their thoughts and feelings about the topic chosen for five minutes.

(b)   The Listener should try to encourage the Talker to communicate their thoughts and feelings in a way that he/she can understand.

(c)   The Observer should note what the Listener did and said that either helped or hindered the talker in communicating.

After each five minute period the Observer should report to both Listener and Talker what was observed, and time should be allowed for discussion.

The whole process will be repeated three times, each time the roles of talker, listener, and observer are changed so that each person takes each role once.

Advice on Listening

1.   Get physically relaxed and comfortable.

2.   Look at the person you are talking to and concentrate your attention on them (without staring).

3.   Respond by asking open questions which will enable the person to express their feelings further e.g. "How did you feel about that". Avoid closed questions such as "Were you angry about that ?". Open invitations at the beginning such as "What would you like to talk about ?" are often helpful.

4.   Do not interrupt with your own experiences as you might in ordinary conversation.

5.   Do not talk too much; your job is to encourage the other to talk, and to express their feelings.

6.   At times when what the other is saying is not clear to you or them, it may be helpful to accurately summarise what you hear them say (this might require you to interpret what they have said including the non-verbal clues).

Topics

1.   My worst holiday

2.   Something that upset me last week

3.   One of my pet hates

4.   Something I am not looking forward to doing