

Fostering good team dynamics

Warren Singer discusses the theory and practise behind creating effective teams

Introduction

Most technical communicators work on team projects, which requires collaborating with project managers, engineers, other authors, editors and other team members. Teams can come together for short periods, and disband as soon as the project is completed, or can continue on to other projects.

Most of us would agree that for our team to be successful, a number of key elements must be present:

- a focus and common agenda – all members need to work together in order to achieve a common aim (e.g., produce a user guide).
- a process for viewing and discussing project difficulties and resolving issues.
- A healthy and functional team, where team members co-operate and each team member makes a useful contribution

This article looks at some of the theory behind team dynamics (the way in which team members interact with each other and function as a team), and how team functioning can be improved. I also draw on my experience to provide examples and suggestions of particular relevance to technical communicators.

Although the focus is on teams, many of the principles apply to being a part of a group, such as a publications department.

Understanding factors that influence team dynamics

Models based on research are commonly used to explain team dynamics. These models help to focus on different aspects of teams, such as:

- Team roles
- Team development
- Team interaction
- Team co-operation
- Team problem-solving
- Team leadership
- Team motivation
- Team environment

Models are useful for understanding and categorising group behaviour, and can help explain much of what goes on in teams. However,

they don't provide all the answers and often personal experience from working in teams can provide important insights into what can go wrong and how team performance can be improved.

This section summarises some of the most influential models of team dynamics.

Team roles

Team members can take on different roles, which can contribute to the success or failure of the team. Based on research on managers in the UK in the 1980s, Meredith Belbin identified roles (clusters of behaviour and ways of communicating) that appear to be common to most teams. In Belbin's view, when team roles clash (e.g., more than one member adopts the same role), team role sacrifice may be necessary. Here are examples of some of Belbin's roles:

Plant	Unorthodox, knowledgeable and imaginative, needs careful handling to be effective. Individualistic, disregarding practical details or protocol.
Resource Investigator	Extrovert, enthusiastic communicator, with good connections outside the team. Enjoys exploring new ideas, responds well to challenges, and creates this attitude amongst others.
Chairman	Calm, self-confident and decisive when necessary. The social leader of the group, ensuring individuals contribute fully, and guiding the team to success.
Team Worker	Socially-oriented and sensitive to others. Provides an informal network of communication and support, preventing feuding and fragmentation.
Company Worker	The Organiser who turns plans into tasks. Conservative, hard-working, full of common sense, conscientious and methodical.

In any team situation, members naturally gravitate towards roles that suite their personality and the needs of the team.

In my experience clear delineation of responsibilities is vital to enable team members to work together effectively. Good project management practise ensures that each member of the team has a clear idea of where his or her responsibilities and deliverables lie.

Team formation and development

Many of us have experienced how the dynamics of our team can change over time, from when first established until it becomes a mature, functioning unit. Introducing new team members can change the dynamics.

In the 1980s Bruce Tucker formalised a model with five stages of team evolution:

1. Forming	When team members get together, members may be unsure, possibly polite and reserved
2. Storming	This may involve a period of turbulence and conflict, as members work out their respective roles and function within the team
3. Norming	This stage involves the team member working towards a unified standard of roles and behaviour
4. Performing	Once the team has matured, it can start functioning at its most efficient.
5. Adjourning	This stage describes the dissolution of the team

Teams undergo their own developmental process before they become fully functional and perform at their best.

If you have been part of a sporting team you will have experienced how overcoming obstacles and uniting against a common adversary can help mould the team over time into a functioning unit.

Team Interaction

Transactional Analysis (TA) was developed by Eric Berne as an approach to psychoanalysis in the early 1950s. It has influenced some current ideas on team-working. The basic unit of TA is the transaction, which describes the nature of the interaction between two people, and their psychological state at the time. The state adopted by the person who starts the transaction will affect

the way the other person responds.

I'M NOT OK YOU'RE OK "I wish I could do that as well as you do"	I'M OK YOU'RE OK "We're making good progress now"
I'M NOT OK YOU'RE NOT OK "Oh this is terrible - we'll never make it"	I'M OK YOU'RE NOT OK "You're not doing that right - let me show you"

According to TA, healthy team dynamics occur when team members adopt an I'm OK, you're OK approach and use Adult to Adult interactions.

Teams where members accept each other and treat each other as adults tend to be happy and productive teams.

Team problem solving

Teams tend to be more radical in their problem solving than individuals. The reason for this has to do with acceptance of risk – teams may trust more in their decisions and assume more risk than an individual might be prepared to.

Edward de-Bona's *Six Thinking Hats* provides a framework for describing team problem-solving. The hats describe the thinking process that may be required in a given team situation:

White	Neutral and objective, concerned with objective facts and figures
Red	Relates to anger and rage, so is concerned with emotions
Black	Represents the negative - why things can't be done
Yellow	Sunny and positive, indicating hope and positive thinking
Green	Indicates creativity and new ideas
Blue	Concerned with control and organisation of thinking

The hats provide an easy way to describe what is happening in your team. For example, if your team is struggling with an apparently insurmountable problem, ask them to put on their Yellow Hats to generate some positive approaches. Or you can ask someone who is being negative to take their Black Hat off for a moment.

Team Co-operation

Since each one of us is unique, with our own expectations and needs, conflict can be a natural part of our interactions with others. In the *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Model* the tension between assertiveness and co-operation results in five different ways of responding to conflict situations:

Competing (Assertive and uncooperative)	An individual pursues his own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which an individual uses whatever power seems appropriate to win their own position.
Accommodating (Unassertive and co-operative)	The individual neglects his own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person. Accommodating might take the form of obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.
Avoiding (Unassertive and uncooperative)	The person neither pursues his own concerns nor those of the other individual. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically side-stepping an issue, postponing an issue, or withdrawing from a threatening situation.
Collaborating (Assertive and co-operative)	Involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights or trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.
Compromising (Assertive and co-operative)	Involves finding a mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. In some situations, compromising might mean splitting the difference between the two positions, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground solution.

The most healthy interactions between team members involve collaborating, or, where this is not possible, compromising.

We are sometimes placed in positions where different team members may disagree on the way forward in a project or the particular contents of a

document. Working in a collaborative way, based on the objectives of the project, is often the best and most practical way to resolve the issue. This requires the ability to listen carefully to all parties and understand different points of view.

Team leadership

Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey created a model for *Situational Leadership* in the 1960's that recommended managers adapt their leadership style to meet the needs of their team. The model characterises leadership style based on the amount of direction and support the leader gives to the team:

+ Supportive Behavior	Supporting	Coaching
	Delegating	Directing
	-	+ Directive Behavior

- Directing Leaders define the roles and tasks of the team and supervise them closely. Decisions are made by the leader and announced, so communication is largely one-way.

Physiological	The basic survival requirements of warmth, shelter and food
Security	Protection from danger of threat
Social	Relations with others, expressed as friendship comradeship or love
Self-respect	Sense of personal worth, respect and autonomy
Self-Actualisation	Sense of achieving your full potential

- Coaching Leaders still define roles and tasks, but seeks ideas and suggestions. Decisions remain the leader's prerogative, but communication is much more two-way.
- Supporting Leaders pass on day-to-day decisions, such as task allocation and processes. The leader facilitates and takes part in decisions, but control is with the team members.
- Delegating Leaders are still involved in decisions and problem-solving, but control is with the team. The team decides when and how the leader will be involved.

When working with junior team members or newly formed technical authoring teams, a

coaching approach might be required, whereas delegation might be more appropriate for an established and mature team.

Team motivation

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs provides a model for understanding individual and team motivation. Maslow defined five levels of need, listed in ascending importance:

Physiological	The basic survival requirements of warmth, shelter and food
Security	Protection from danger of threat
Social	Relations with others, expressed as friendship comradeship or love
Self-respect	Sense of personal worth, respect and autonomy
Self-Actualisation	Sense of achieving your full potential

Once a need is satisfied, the individual will not be motivated by more of the same, but will seek to satisfy higher order needs. What’s more, a higher order need will not be a motivator if lower order needs remain unmet.

For example, team members won’t be concerned about working relationships or professional achievement if they are worried that they are about to lose their jobs.

Team Communication

This important aspect of team functioning deserves its own section. Nicky Stanton’s book *Mastering Communication* provides a model of the communication process:

sender-message-medium-receiver-feedback

Communication involves two parties – the sender of the message and the person who the message is intended for (receiver). The message can be transferred using different channels or medium. Feedback from the receiver enables the sender to modify the message to clarify communication

Team dynamics can impact on this process and create barriers to the communication of the message. The following are examples of barriers to communication within a team:

- Team environment
- Cultural differences
- Physical distance
- Team hierarchy
- Team interdependencies

Team environment

The physical layout of buildings and the workspace can affect teams. Much of the open-plan design we see in modern buildings has been influenced partly by the theory that open spaces promote good team dynamics and open communication, as the physical barriers to communication are removed.

Use of physical space is also important for denoting hierarchy or importance – those most important in the team might have their own office space. This will affect how other members in the team interact with the person who has a private office space.

Cultural differences

Many modern teams are multi-cultural and multi-lingual. Language and cultural differences can result in miscommunication or misunderstanding of the message. When working with non-English speakers from other countries who are on the team, there may be difficulties understanding the message and also different cultural expectations and sensitivities. For example, the level of familiarity versus formality might be different for an Austrian (more formal and reserved) as opposed to an American team member (less formal and unreserved), and this can have an impact on communication and team dynamics.

Physical distance

Modern multi-disciplinary teams may be spread across geographic locations and offices. Closeness and familiarity creates a different team dynamic: members that meet often and talk face-to-face, or see each other in the corridor tend to be more relaxed and less formal with each other. When communication is only by phone or email, this can create psychological distance, which can hamper a project’s progress.

Team hierarchy

Flatter teams tend to be more egalitarian and are able to communicate more effectively. Some teams may have 3-4 levels of reporting. In this case team members lower down in the hierarchy may receive messages indirectly as it is passed down the chain, which can act as a barrier to communication and result in misunderstanding. Team members higher in the hierarchy may feel they are more important to the project, which can result in a

competing approach or dictating leadership style that creates barriers to open communication. Team members at the top of the hierarchy may not be receiving communication from those at the bottom of the chain, because it has been filtered out or those lower down feel intimidated to express themselves.

Team interdependencies

Problems may arise where the delivery of one team member is contingent on communication from another member in the team. This is especially the case in our roles as technical communicators.

For example, a technical author cannot complete the draft of a manual without the co-operation of the engineers and reviewers involved in the project. A manual cannot be printed in time without the co-operation of the purchasing and procurement team. Proper and timely engagement with others on whom we are dependant for success is essential.

In complex team projects where there exists a chain link of such interdependencies, this can create severe delays. Problems or delays in one area of the chain can delay the work of others and add considerably to project costs.

The medium

The channel in which messages are delivered within the team can affect communication and team dynamics. For example, consider the impact of the following:

Verbal vs. email communication

A message delivered face to face or over the phone can have a totally different impact from a message sent by email. In my experience, email can sometimes be misused, as a means of avoiding confrontation or when adopting a competing approach – in other words, as an excuse for actually sitting down with someone and resolving issues in a collaborative manner (see the *Kilmann model*).

A good example of this is the technical author who sends out a formal complaint email to a reviewer who has consistently missed deadlines. This may be justified, but in the interests of good team working, it might be more effective to sit down with the reviewer to discuss and resolve any underlying issues.

Verbal vs. non-verbal communication (voice tone and body language)

Within team meetings, non-verbal communication is a vital element of communication. In fact the same person may be communicating two totally different messages through their verbal and non-verbal body language. Consider the following example:

Manager to a junior team member: "Bob, can you get that work done by tomorrow afternoon?" (With a clenched jaw, chin down, the manager subconsciously clenches a fist and shifts his posture.)

Bob responds with a shrug of his shoulders and smirk, directed at another colleague. "Sure I can."

The manager's words imply a request and the verbal response of Bob is that he can do the work. However, the non-verbal message reflects unexpressed conflict: the manager's body language implies defensiveness and apprehension, the body language of Bob and his tone of voice reflects belligerence. Such a situation will create tensions in the team. Team members may subconsciously feel that they are being asked to take sides.

The above scenario illustrates some of the complexity that underlies the typical interaction between team members.

Feedback

An important element in the communication process is the verbal and non-verbal feedback constantly communicated within the team. Team members regulate their behavior based on feedback –if they don't respond to feedback they are likely to be treated with hostility or resentment.

Team values

Team values are an essential aspect of team dynamics. Healthy team values need to be part of the culture of working and relating to others. Examples of values include: trust, respect, honesty, openness, listening, co-operation and contribution. This is something that all members of the team can actively contribute to.

Team building exercises can help to develop working relationships and improve motivation, communication, support and trust within the

team. Managers can also work on improving team-working skills, such as listening, turn-taking, exchanging ideas, summarising and decision-making.

Recognising the strengths and talents that team members can contribute to the team will help to make the team more productive. For example, using talents that fall outside formal role descriptions can provide team members with opportunities for career growth in new areas or make use of existing skills that have been acquired in other contexts (e.g., hobbies).

Summary - improving team dynamics

So what makes an effective team?

Taking from the models of team dynamics described earlier here is a summary of some elements that are likely to contribute to the formation of an effective team:

- Clearly defined team roles, responsibilities and deliverables
- Mechanisms for providing feedback and resolving team issues
- Instilling team values and approaches that emphasise collaboration and compromise between team members
- Effective team leadership
- Removal or reduction of barriers to communication within the team
- Providing effective motivation for team members and opportunities for growth

Teams are fluid entities, so the dynamics within the team are continually changing, as the team develops, new members are introduced or team circumstances change. This offers hope that even the most poorly functioning team can be improved.

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