Teams, Tantrums, and Tears: Conflict Management in 2020

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"The better able team members are to engage, speak, listen, hear, interpret, and respond constructively, the more likely their teams are to leverage conflict rather than be leveled by it." [1]

Overview

Background

Managing conflict is a challenge in capstone design. Studies have shown that:

- Conflict can undermine capstone design team performance
- Teams are likely to hide conflict from instructors
- Training students and mentors on conflict management is important

We share our approach to develop a conflict resolution toolset for capstone design

Results

In student pre- to mid- and post-self-assessment surveys (n=3092), we find:

- A significant increase (p<0.01) in confidence in resolving conflict in a satisfactory way
- **This indicates that students recognize development in these skills**

Multi-Faceted Approach

Team Activities

Goal: Align individual motivations with collective objectives

Intentional Communication:
Team Role Proposals
One week after team formation

An early source of conflict can be the section of team roles

Intentional team discussion about what each member may contribute:

- Each member proposes a management role to create shared team leadership
- Documents and shares with team's faculty mentor

Expectation Setting:
Team Charters
Five weeks after team formation

Teams set norms and expectations

- Including workload, attendance, punctuality, communication tools, decision-making and enforcement
- Signed by all team members
- Revisited/revised in January

Trainings for Toolset Development

Community Building:
Effective Bystander Intervention Training
Facilitated by Campus Office of Institutional and Equity Compliance (OIEC)

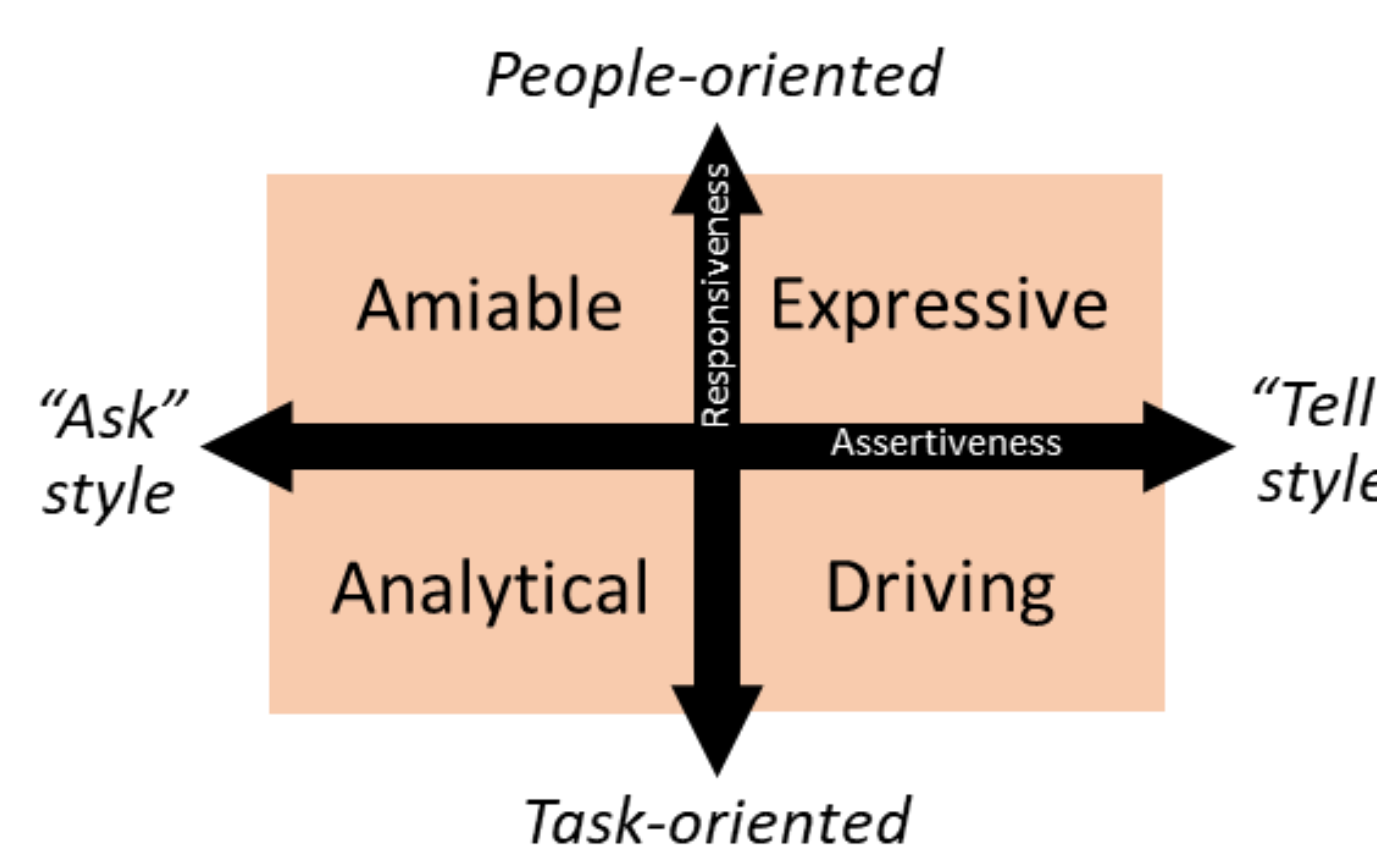Focus on community accountability

- Students learn various effective strategies to address situations where "help may be needed" including team-related scenarios
- Students discuss barriers to action and possible strategies to consider in an intervention

Empathy Development:
Social Styles Training

We teach the Social Style® framework to help students to recognize their preferences and adapt to the work styles of others

- Students learn effective approaches for working with various styles. No style is better or worse, or preferred. Various styles can make more effective teams, and can also cause tension.
- In one revealing day of class, we seat the students based on social style and experience different tendencies first-hand *(e.g. expressives chatter, drivers request directness)*

	People-oriented	
"Ask" style	Amiable	Expressive
	Analytical	Driving
	Task-oriented	

(Responsiveness / Assertiveness — "Tell" style)

Difficult Conversations Training

We encourage students to approach situations where there is a perceived conflict to address the situation and work toward a satisfactory outcome. We:

- Discourage student's instincts to ignore the situation
- We walk them through a process of describing their concerns using "I" statements ("I worry...", "I feel...")
- Working together to find a mutually agreeable solution

Advising / Coaching

Coaching
We work to empower and coach students through preparation to address a situation using the Difficult Conversations technique before we step in

Interventions
If we need to intervene with a team:

- We meet with all individuals involved
- We present facts as we know them and help teams start to implement plans

Team Check-in Meetings
Periodic scheduled "check-in meetings" with each team. These are typically conducted twice per semester with each team and are 45 minutes

- We ask the team about typical update topics as well as team emotions (accomplishments and concerns)
- The true check-in is not always in what the students report during these meetings, but what they are clearly trying not to say

Contextualization

"All hands on deck"

We approach conflict management as a team effort

- Faculty mentors and clients participate in training at the start of the year and are asked to model professional behavior
- Faculty mentors are taught tools and our philosophy for conflict management
- We communicate so they can support the resolution approach

360° Feedback

We discuss frequently that design is a social process. We seek input on student performance from :

- Peer feedback surveys (4/year)
- Faculty Mentors
- Clients
- Program and facility staff

Conversations and feedback are opportunities for growth leading to future success, not punitive action

Fact-finding

When gathering information, we note that the truth is often between perspectives

Person A's perspective | What actually happened | Person B's perspective
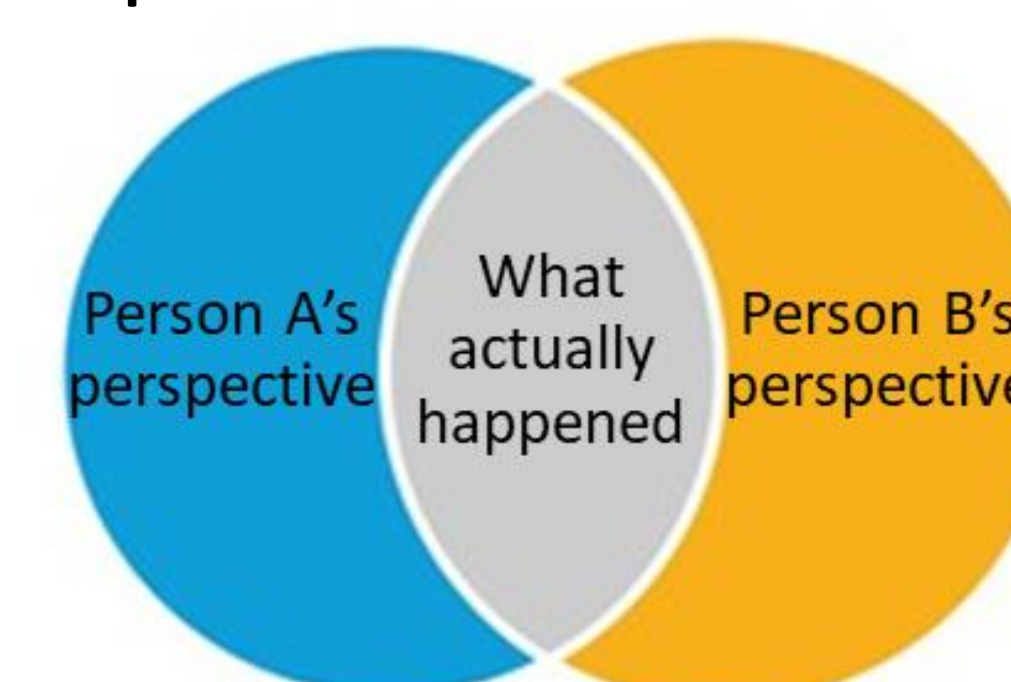
The Venn Diagram of Truth

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