ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY: TEAMBUILDING SKILLS

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Abstract: As experts in emotional intelligence have repeatedly shown, what groups and organizations need in order to see a project through to the end is the capability to channel group dynamics into that kind of positive energy which should accommodate differences and even capitalize on them, instead of shying away from them or even resenting them. Team spirit has been long cherished as one of the best skills to have as a professional; during the interview one has to make proof of the ability to work with others efficiently to reach a common goal and then to navigate the unexpected situations that the challenge of working in a team may bring about. The article proposes to look into the concept of team building and to analyze possible ways of including it on the list of soft skills to be found on the agenda of the "English for Professional Communication" seminar.

Keywords: teambuilding, soft skills, emotional intelligence, active listening, intercultural communication, English for Professional Communication

The fact that nowadays being successful in any kind of job, especially in white collar jobs, requires not only hard skills, but also soft skills is obvious from the large number of specialized books, courses and life coaches that aim at training both employers and employees to become more adept at dealing with the trickiest type of negotiation of all, namely social negotiation. When seen from outside, a business meeting or even a simple dialogue between two colleagues may seem merely that: a context in which people send messages back and forth. In fact, much more may be going on behind the scenes: a game of power may be at play; or maybe personal, professional or cultural differences surface and get in the way; or maybe no actual listening is taking place, each of the interlocutors focusing only on their own ideas; or maybe

information is withheld on purpose or unwillingly; or negative feelings are being suppressed, only to bubble up later, behind one's back; or maybe double talk is being used. Genuine communication is often hard to achieve, especially in a business context where one's professional, more restrained persona needs to take over one's true way of being, in order to stick to formal norms of behavior at the workplace. Therefore, enhancing one's soft skills has proven to result in better professional outcomes, since soft skills are both about managing oneself and managing the others, therefore managing the context in which a communication act occurs.

One soft skill which encompasses a number of other valuable skills is one very much sought-after nowadays, namely teamwork. It seems that "over the past couple of decades, a cult has grown up around teams […] teams are considered almost sacrosanct" (Hackman in Cotou 5). There is widespread belief that "teams outperform individuals acting alone or in larger organizational groupings, especially when performance requires multiple skills, judgments, and experiences" (Katzenbach 9), although there is also the odd comment on the inefficacity of teams: "Contrary to conventional wisdom, teams may be your worse option for tackling a challenging task. Problems with coordination, motivation, and competition can badly damage team performance" (Hackman in Cotou, 6). In addition, not everybody is cut out to work with others all the time: "It is also vital to recognize that many people – especially introverts – need extra quiet and privacy in order to do their best work" (Cain, 107); too much emphasis on teamwork "has the potential to stifle productivity at work and to deprive schoolchildren of the skills they'll need to achieve excellence in an increasingly competitive world" (Cain, 87). That being said, there are numerous advantages of working together with others for a common goal; for the purpose of this article I will focus on what I believe to be the most important of all, namely the fact that being a good team player involves several other sub-skills and development of teamwork skills will often result in a complex, nuanced and more effective approach to the issue of social interaction and of life in general.

Before discussing the various sub-skills teamwork comes with, perhaps one should define what "a team" is. According to Katzenbach, "a team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (Katzenbach: 1999, 45), the key words here being "small number", "complementary skills", "common purpose", "mutually

accountable". Therefore, a group still united in spite of their diversity, who are supposed to be acting "one for all, all for one" to reach a common goal.

What kind of skills should therefore such a group have in order to keep their cohesion and willingness to see a project through to the end? To meet one's understandable need to preserve one's individuality, manifested through one's own ideas, style and personality and still to take others into consideration and their unique ways of dealing with the world? To be able to mitigate the inevitable conflicts stemming from differences as much as from being too much like-minded? Here are some ideas: "Teamwork skills include the mix of interactive, interpersonal, problem solving and communication skills needed by a group of people working on a common task, in complementary roles, towards a common goal whose outcomes are greater than those possible by any one person working independently" (Crebert et al., 5). Or: "Teamwork represents a set of values that encourage listening and responding constructively to views expressed by others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, providing support, and recognizing the interests and achievements of others" (Katzenbach and Smith, 23-24: 2011). Or, more poetically put: "Virtuoso teams comprise the elite experts in their particular fields and are specially convened for ambitious projects. Their work style has a frenetic rhythm. They emanate a discernible energy. They are utterly unique in their ambitiousness of their goals, the intensity of their conversations, the degree of their esprit, and the extraordinary results they deliver" (Fisher and Boynton, 132).

Personally, I go with that the belief according to which the true measure of a team's success is given by the level of emotional intelligence the team makes proof of in the face of diversity, adversity, and change. Therefore, I believe that what teachers should strive to develop in their students is the invaluable ability to make sense of and to manage one's inner world and outer attitudes as well as the ability to identify and deal with the challenges posed by the others' unique vantage point and work habits. But individual emotional intelligence is not enough, and hence the need to look more thoroughly into the concept of "team", in companies and in schools: "A group's EI isn't simply the sum of its members'. Instead, it comes from norms that support awareness and regulations of emotions within and outside the team. These norms build trust, group identity, and a sense of group efficacy. Members feel that they work better together than individually" (Druskat and Wolff, 69). Emotional intelligence in a team manifests itself in the seemingly unimportant gestures, words, and actions that add up to build that kind atmosphere

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which fosters work progress: "Group emotional intelligence is about the small acts that make a big difference. It is not about a team member working all night to meet a deadline; it is about saying thank-you for doing so. It is not about in-depth discussion of ideas; it is about asking a quiet member for his thoughts. It is not about harmony, lack of tension, and all members liking each other; it is about acknowledging when harmony is false, tension is unexpressed, and treating others with respect"(Druskat and Wolff, 83).

I believe it is this type of subtle, yet sophisticated attitude to problems occurring in teams that we, the teachers of "English for Professional Communication" in the Polytechnic University, of Bucharest should try to instill in our students. Teaching teamwork skills would come as a natural and necessary completion of an already rich list of items to be approached during the seminar: intercultural communication, company flowchart, telephoning skills, writing short professional documents, elements of the employment file, job interviews, presentation skills, successful meetings. The introduction of a module on teambuilding in the seminar "English for Professional Communication" will give students the opportunity to:

- Reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of working in teams and on their own

- Become educated to the theories underpinning the concept of teamwork

- Become more self-aware through reflection on their own personality type, work habits, and inter-relational patterns of behavior;

- Become more aware of the existence of a diversity of personality types and social behaviors and understand both the advantages and disadvantages of being/thinking/ perceiving the world/interacting with the others in a certain way;

- Become aware of the possible problems that can appear throughout the stages of a project at the level of team dynamics;

- Be able to adapt to the dynamics of a context over which they may not have total control due to internal factors (the team members' feelings and behaviors) and external factors (change of deadlines, not enough resources for project completion, unexpected mishaps etc.)

- Form an informed opinion about what an ideal team may look like for them (establish values, rules, methods, practices); draw a team contract and stick to it;

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- Assume various roles within the team, therefore become more aware of the usefulness and of the challenges the latter come with;

- Learn to listen actively and to give and receive constructive feedback;

- Learn to plan ahead and to manage time and pace in order to accommodate the other members of the team and to meet a deadline;

- Learn that conflict is part of collaborative work and find ways to deal with it in a healthy, effective, and constructive way;

- Learn to assess themselves, their peers, and the outcomes of the stages of a project

Some useful terms that can be touched upon while dealing with the concept of teamwork are: emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, receptive/active listening, constructive feedback, time management, negotiation skills, conflict management, leadership, non-verbal communication; all these skills are essential when working in a team. The classes on teamwork will focus on two main areas: theoretical frameworks and teambuilding activities. For the purpose of this article I will focus on one theoretical item and one practical activity to be used in the classroom with the aim of raising awareness of the subtleties of group dynamics.

One example of a basic theoretical concept that can be passed on to students for a better understanding of the changes a team goes through is team development lifecycle: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965). Forming is the initial stage at which team members get to know each other at a superficial level and get familiar with what they are required to do. Storming is that phase in which differences of opinion and work habits start to pose problems; it is often a stage of conflict which needs skillful handling by a highly emotionally intelligent leader. Norming is that stage in which teammates have reached a consensus, they have accommodated differences and they focus on the task at hand. Performing is the phase in which the job is actually done, the most productive phase of them all, when the atmosphere created around the tasks at hand and the relationship between members is conducive to big leaps forward in the development of the project. Every stage is put up for discussion with respect to the possible problems it can pose to the leader and the team members, and specific case studies (with the questions stemming from them) are provided. For example, what would be an efficient way of getting people to know each other and their potential in the forming

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phrase? What would be an efficient way of solving conflicts stemming from differences in personality, opinions, work habits, or pace in the storming phase? What could the leader do to in order to preserve the level of harmony that the team has (hopefully) reached in the norming phase?

As for teamwork skills-enhancing practical exercises, there are countless activities teachers can propose. I will focus only on one which I believe to be of paramount importance since it provides students with a useful tool for many life contexts, namely the ability of making sense of one's way of perceiving and relating to the world, as well as of others'. In fact, it is the good old but always in fashion exercise of self-awareness which can be used when teaching most of the items to be found on the agenda of the seminar "English for Professional Communication", an exercise in which students are made to ask themselves questions about their own personality, preferences, values, skills, and habits. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is probably the most widely used personality test in companies and it will surely prove useful in this context as well, even if in a simplified form. The types identified through the test are: extrovert /introvert (orientation to the world), sensing/intuitive (perception of the world), thinking/ feeling (judgment about the world), perceiving/ judging (attitude to the world and people) (Berry et al., 15). Awareness and understanding of the diverse types of people one can deal with at the workplace and of the advantages and disadvantages they bring to the team can lead to a better atmosphere and to less judgmental attitudes toward difference. They also help when time comes to choose roles within teams; thus, students get familiar with the possible types of role – plant, coordinator, monitor-evaluator, implementer, completer-finisher, shaper, team worker, specialist (Belbin Associates in Crebert, 12) and they train to recognize patterns of thinking and behaviors they see in others, and, most importantly, to recognize, monitor and adjust their own personal style of dealing with the outer world. Thus, I agree with the contention that "as teachers in any field, it is essential that we stress to students that they do self-examination to understand who they are and help them develop a clear picture of what they can contribute in the classroom and beyond " (Berry et al., 19).

To conclude, I will acknowledge the fact that the topic of team building is complex and nuanced and often difficult to deal with in a practical way, given its slippery, ineffable nature which entails feelings and states of minds. Nevertheless, it is essential to deal with it since no individual skill or expertise will compensate for poor teamwork in a team whose members need

to work together. Therefore, precisely because of its sophisticated quality, I believe the issue of teamwork should be approached more often in the classroom, not only by simply asking students to work together to complete a task, but also by giving them practical tools to consciously make the experience more efficient and more pleasant.

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