

Tartan Teamwork: Student Perspectives on Teamwork at Carnegie Mellon

76-371: Innovation in Teamwork

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Introduction

Extracurricular activities play a big part of the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) experience — whether it is Greek life or a Buggy project, organizational activities define many of our students' college experiences. Although student activities are such a critical piece of our experience, they are far from perfect due to faulty teamwork.

In order to improve these important student activity experiences, our team of consultants has interviewed 25 students to learn about others' experiences of working in a student-led organization. It is worth noting that one hundred percent of our interviewees have expressed discontent with at least one aspect of their team experiences. This report will focus on the 5 problems mentioned most frequently in our interviews, which are commitment, trust, preparation, guidelines and support. By sharing this information, we hope to shed light on critical teamwork issues on student organizations, and in doing so, help administrators to effectively improve student organizational activity on CMU's campus.

Communicating Expectations of Commitment

In our data, we have found that many student organizations struggle with leaders communicating their expectations for membership, and, in turn, members struggle with communicating their assumptions about how much time and effort they should, and will, commit. We call this “communicating expectations of commitment”.

One example of this is an organization where leaders are nominated based on their technical skills, but not necessarily their leadership skills. This led to them having a difficult time communicating their expectations of the general members. Because of difficulty in communication, the general members had false expectations of how much time they should commit to their work for the organization, which led to dissatisfaction with the work that was done even though the work was technically successful. The members and leaders were dissatisfied because there was a feeling amongst the group that, had the expectations been more clear, there's a possibility that the work they did could have been even better, but they would never be able to find out.

It was also clear that oftentimes people created figured worlds, a term explained in Holland's *Agency and Identity* as people developing their identities based on “what if” situations, surrounding a role they fulfill in an organization based on their preconceived notion of how the role has functioned in the past. However, this leaves no room for innovation in student organizations. If no one is willing to step outside of their figured world, or the expectations they've created for themselves, they are creating a stagnant and unfulfilling environment within their organization.

On the other hand, every organization also experiences new members joining the group and having absolutely no figured world surrounding that organization. Due to their lack of experience, it can become a “free for all” unless the expectations of commitment are communicated clearly and early on. In one instance, our interviewee found that this lack of awareness of necessary time commitment led to older members taking on more responsibility in order to pick up for the slack of new members who did not understand they were not committing the time that was expected of them.

Lastly, a huge issue that student organization teams run into is when a member's time commitment falters due to outside priorities, such as work, academics, or health. One example of this is a student who had to leave his athletic team due to an injury, but it can also manifest in students who have to cut back their time commitment with an organization because they have to increase their hours at work or put in extra time studying to pass a class. The most important discovery that we made in this regard is that these necessary changes in commitment are unavoidable, but it is of the utmost importance to communicate them with your team members in the interest of honesty and proactivity. Although others will inevitably have to pick up the slack of the person cutting back, it is easier on everyone when they are given as much time as possible to do so.

One important note in regards to commitment is that we originally equated time commitment to passion and caring about an organization. Throughout our interviews we came to realize that it is not always possible for students to commit the time necessary for an organization — we only have 24 hours in a day, after all. However, there are those who support their organization in important ways regardless of their limited time, such as offering moral support or completing smaller tasks that are still crucial to the function of the group. It is worth further exploration to discover how these members contribute to their organizations.

Lack of Trust and Delegation

Another issue that our team uncovered through our critical incident research dealt with trust and delegation issues. Trust means relying on someone else to do the right thing or for other individuals to complete their commitment to the team; trust forms the basis of all relationships and interactions and leads team members to be truly collaborative. When trust is present in a team or organization, people step up and do their best work together. They share a common purpose, take risks, think “outside of the box,” have each other’s backs, and communicate openly and honestly all in support of that common purpose. The activities of the successful team are about the “we” and not the “me.”

In the context of student-run organizations, Carnegie Mellon students should be able to rely on their student teammates or team members in their respective organizations to accomplish the goals of the organization and use those experiences to shape their involvement in extra-curricular and academic activities on campus as well as in their professional careers. However, we discovered that these organizations demonstrate limited levels of trust among those organizations and teams. This low level of trust hampers delegation, collaboration, and positive teamwork experiences for students and can exhibit itself in many forms, such as minimal levels of delegation, no one stepping up, and communication issues.

Gee’s reading on Discourse and Holland’s on identity give us some clues why teams may be experiencing these issues by considering a student’s Discourse or agency. For example, some students may exhibit a secondary Discourse that is unrelated to the activities of the team (such as specific to a student’s discipline) and have not yet acquired or developed the knowledge or ways of being that would allow for an individual to be successful in a team. If we look at Holland’s identity article, students may not believe they have agency to contribute at the level required on a team or have a sense that it is okay to ask for help or delegate as some students have no experience with either of these. Another way to look at this is that some students simply believe that only they can complete the work, and therefore do not appreciate the value of delegating tasking to additional team members. In each of these situations, they aren’t considering the “we” perspective.

Our data shows that student team members experience difficulty in “getting to we” and often times remain focused on the “me” in their interactions with teams. Specifically, one student shared her experience on the start-up of an organization in which she is one of the co-founders. During the initial start-up process, she and the other co-founder worked closely and collaboratively to get university recognition for that organization. However, reality of the academic school year demands for the other co-founder set in and the launch has not occurred as initially planned even though the team has been expanded. My interviewee commented that “If you want something done, you have to do it yourself” which surprised us because she’s discounting the value that teamwork brings when you are collaborating with a team of people that you can count on to work toward a set of goals. She had placed trust in the co-founder who had let her down and has not developed a level of trust with the newer team members. We were interested to discover that this interviewee has participated in leadership development activities that covered team building with other organizations on campus. However, those experiences have not clearly transferred to her activities with this new organization.

In another incident, an interviewee shared that she started her position by consistently taking the lead on projects rather than delegating, and when the time came for her to delegate the task of starting a new initiative from the ground up no one was willing to step up. It eventually became clear that they would have to drop it for that year because no one believed they would be able to do it. In this situation, the fact that the leader did not trust her members from the beginning led to the members not trusting themselves.

Another type of trust issue that we uncovered is the lack of open and honest communication. It goes without saying that team members expect communication to be direct, open, and safe in the environment of the team. However, when this system of honest communication fails, trust, which is crucial for team functionality and success, can be broken. In another one of our interviews, the interviewee was upset at the lack of open and honest communication amongst her team members. Member A was not happy with the work that Member B completed, and instead of understanding how to giving constructive feedback directly to Member B, Member A secretly told the leader of the organization, which caused a lot of confusion and hindered overall progress of the project. As a result, quite a bit of doubt and resentment broke into the circle of trust, and interfered with the atmosphere of the team for the remainder of the semester.

One of our interviewees presented us with a chart, **Figure 1**, on team connectedness in communication and member satisfaction. She and her teammates experienced poor communication amongst each other. Some members did not communicate with the rest of the team, like the “Y” figure shown below. They felt that they would be more satisfied if they all communicated with each other, as shown in the “All Channel” representation. As you can see, member satisfaction increases as more members become connected via communication. This is the point that we are trying to stress - connectedness in communication will make for a satisfied team, and a satisfied team will produce better quality projects.

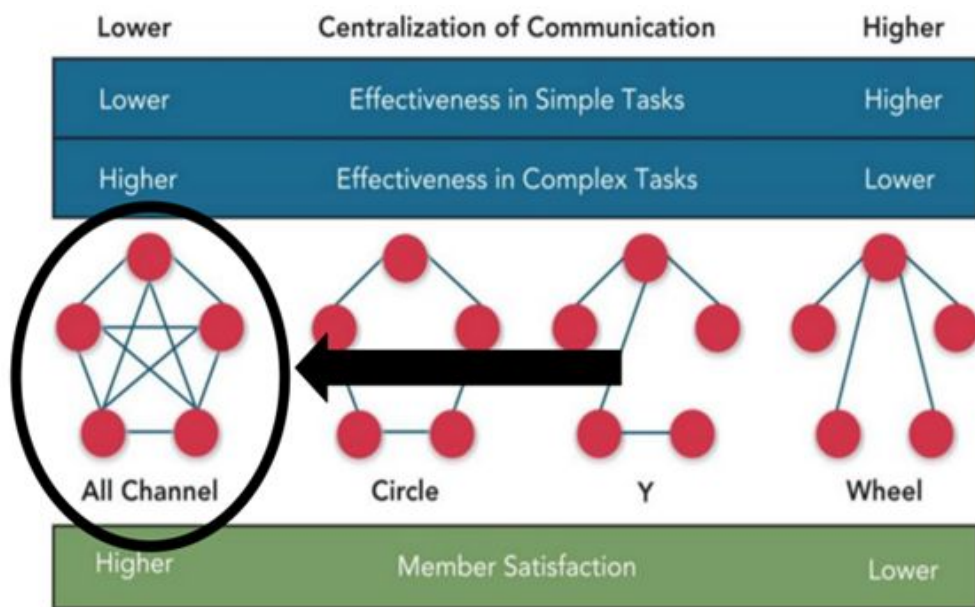


Figure 1: Member Satisfaction correlation with communication

Thankfully, our data is not all negative. We have a few data points that reflect high levels of trust in a student-run organization focused on global medical issues where the project goal was to build sanitation stations (bathroom, shower, sink for laundry). The team had to build this from scratch, and this involved working effectively on a team. Three or four people built the trench, while some others worked on the building tank. Once everyone became comfortable with their tasks, they worked faster. The interviewee said “In 1.5 days we built the whole station. It involved lots of teamwork - someone filled with cement, someone filled gaps, etc. Doing it alone would have been time consuming; being on a team and relying on others with what I cannot do alone helped.” This particular team did “get to we” and attributed the success of the team to:

- Knowing they all had a common goal to help out a family, so they were able to jump right in and quickly get started
- Being open to working with new people that set the groundwork for trust
- Instead of being told what to do, they asked what they could do first! Team members had confidence to take initiative
- Listening to others by practicing open and honest communication; your way may not be the best

Conflicts within a team can occur at any time in the team's life cycle from the beginning to the very last day. In either of these situations it can be helpful to have a set of guidelines or a framework in place to help articulate possible solutions to resolve or even prevent such conflicts. Having a set of guidelines can also be very beneficial for teams working on complex projects that can take long periods of time. Planning and creating guidelines can also be seen as a way for team to take advantage of the explicit and tacit knowledge present within the scope of the team.

Explicit knowledge, or knowledge that is publicly expressed or documented in a team, is vital for effective teamwork. When one or more members of a team are not "on the same page," it becomes difficult to accomplish a task that requires team effort. Explicit knowledge can be thought of as knowledge that is easily transferred from one individual to another, such as the capital of the United States. On the other hand, tacit knowledge can be thought of as knowledge that cannot be explicitly transferred from one person to another. An example of this is when we learn how to play an instrument where the actual skill or knowledge can be extremely hard or almost impossible to transfer, as describing the knowledge can be difficult even for experts in the field. Information about the different people present in a team as well as the tacit knowledge they possess can be put in guideline documents so members in a team know where they can look for particular information or resources.

During a number of our critical incident interviews, a common issue that students kept bringing up was that they were not happy with the participation and performance levels within the organization. In a number of cases, it was unclear to members if they were required to attend meetings or if they were expected to show up. For example, in one of our interviews our

interviewee mentioned that he was unsatisfied with his team member's participation in a project, but did not say anything because there was no established communication model or participation requirement. In such a case it would be beneficial for members in the team to have a formal document in place that establishes requirements, as well as consequences if the requirements are not met.

A successful example of guidelines can be seen in one of our critical incident interviews with a buggy organization. In this organization a formal shared document is created where members must fill out their participation and jobs fulfilled throughout the semester and get points for their tasks completed. The fact that the document is available at all times to all members helps everyone stay informed about their own performance levels and how they are doing with respect to the expectations. Top performing members are given rewards at the end of the semester and members who do not meet a minimum number of points required are fined and are not allowed to attend social events. These consequences can help everyone within the organization stay motivated throughout the course of the project. Also, this document can be seen by all members and is organized such that the members with the least number of points are displayed first. This social pressure on underperforming members can also help raise their performance as they do not want to be seen as the least contributing member on the team.

Insufficient Preparation

It has happened many times before that a campus organization believes being part of the executive board is merely going to ask for weekly meetings, some sessions of note-taking, and proper hi-and-goodbye etiquette. It is our opinion that these activities are simply not enough for effective teamwork in whatever the context may be. Students do not recognize the importance of organizing an officer position schema as well as getting to know each other well. CMU student organization teams overlook the importance of truly understanding how the dynamics of the group come into play.

Before delving into some of the concrete evidence we found that suggests students do not value prior or ongoing team preparation, it would be suitable to understand what is meant by organization. An organizational structure is one that reflects a hierarchy or power tree that students acknowledge, and how each officer or member plays a role in the context of this schema. Take, for example, our aforementioned critical incident interview with the leader of a service organization. Since the new event required a position that did not already exist in the organizational structure, the interviewee had found that students were reluctant to add this additional responsibility to their role. The service organization failed to prepare an explicit role and how it could have been potentially related to senior positions for support, which led to a lack of accountability within the organization.

As suggested, it is vital to be aware of a network of responsibility and support within an executive board, but at the same time getting along with each other is something that is also overlooked by many groups. In our interview with the group focused on global medical issues, there is a clear example of how lack of communication made team effectiveness more difficult. The interviewee and her companion — volunteers at a medical clinic overseas — were not as acquainted with the people around them, which only led to desperation when doubts and problems arose in assisting patients. In time, they learned that they should always speak with their co-workers around them in order to feel more comfortable asking questions. Similar to many other cases, establishing social connections leads to a stronger network of support.

We could also refer to a different interviewee's experience with negative results stemming from an environment where friendship and openness was yet to be developed. Being part of a house

council, he had the responsibility of organizing a social event for residents. His fellow resident assistants had also participated in a discussion in regards to the logistics of the event. However, when the time came for work to be done, his teammates did not assist in getting a budget approval or purchasing tickets. In a competitive and high expectation environment like Carnegie Mellon, they were rather skeptical about what they could do to help out the interviewee. The fact that they did not feel comfortable only served to stop them from feeling confident in stepping up to do simple tasks. In this example, a lack of familiarity in the group simply hindered the chances of having real teamwork since no member would believe in his or her skills.

There are, without a doubt, many consequences for not being able to create a work environment where people are comfortable enough to exploit their true talents. In one of our critical incident interviews, a freshman shared her experience working for an initiative devoted to leadership improvement. There was a supervisor in charge of overseeing their work who did a good job at fostering a very friendly organization culture. Some other students who were not as acquainted with the group just yet showed little interest in working toward the same goal. As a result, even with the efforts of an intelligent supervisor, some unmotivated students gave inaccurate information about their availability and work because they lost interest in the club's purpose over time.

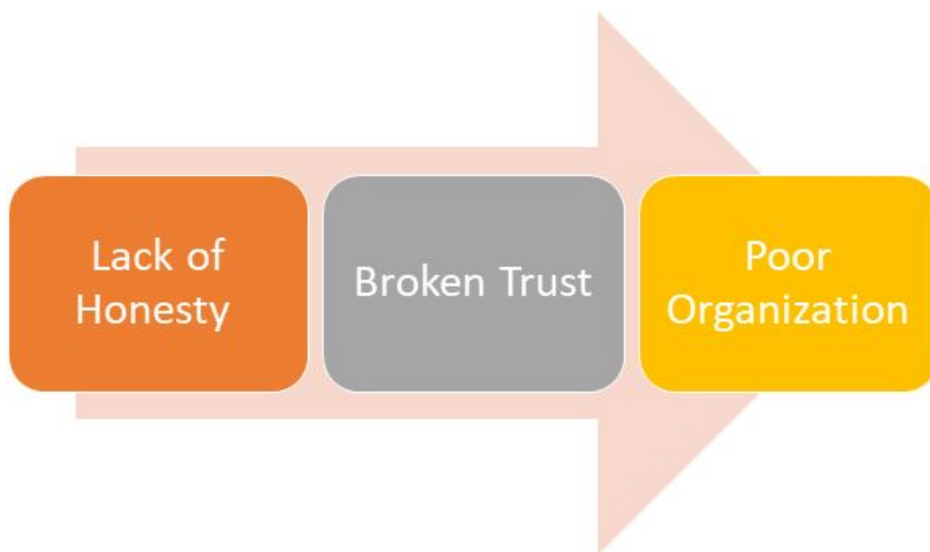


Figure 2: Dishonesty leads to distrust and disorganization

As shown above in **Figure 2**, dishonesty causes teammates to perceive that others on the team are unreliable. In turn, this break in trust affects many of the incidents that take place when

disorganization and chaos wreak havoc in the group. Some additional ramifications also include lowered levels of social sensitivity. If there are tensions arising in the organization internally, members are much less likely to look after one another whenever help or support might be needed. Finally, and on top of the already mentioned layer of disorganization, teams are prone to weak communication. Expectations for members who do not get along or do not coordinate with each other are bound to change for the worse. More specifically, there is a chance for late or untimely responses when it comes to electronic communication platforms.

Support: What We Have versus What We Need

We have briefly mentioned support throughout our exploration into the common issues of teamwork in CMU's student organizations. The term 'support' is interchangeable with assistance, reinforcement, and aid, and is the necessary intervention of an outside party in order to successfully complete a project. In the context of our class project, we asked all of our interviewees about the support they received — who they received support from, whether or not the support contributed to their success, and what types of support they wish they had received. Those who received support, whether from their teammates, advisors, or working professionals, felt that the physical, financial, and emotional assistance that they received was crucial for their projects. On the other hand, those who did not receive sufficient support wished they had received more. They acknowledged that support is crucial for any type of project, and would have appreciated more help from the outside.

The types of support that students received varied across their respective organizations. Student organizations such as Buggy received not only emotional support, but financial support from their alumni as well. On the other hand, one volunteer organization received support from medical professionals on how to utilize medical equipment for their mission trip abroad. Other organizations received traditional advisor support from staff, and many other students received support from their friends and fellow teammates, as well.

One of the more common types of support that students valued, or wished they had received, was professional support from working adults. This popular form of support was appreciated and desired by many student organizations. One interviewee on a Buggy team revealed that support from their alumni was very important to them, attributing most of their success to their alumni. The interviewee said that the alumni contributed significantly toward their budget so that they could build a stronger and sturdier Buggy car. The alumni also provided them with valuable moral and emotional support, encouraging them to make progress and to complete their task of building and training for the Buggy races. The alumni, having been through such tasks and projects before, understood how challenging these tasks were for the current Buggy team and were able to sympathize with the students and offer guidance and support along the way. Thus, the students really valued their support.

On the other hand, another interviewee responded in her interview that she did not receive nearly enough support from working professionals, and would have appreciated more support for her team. In this team, students get trained by medical professionals to use real medical instruments in order to diagnose patients during volunteer trips abroad. However, such training sessions are brief and infrequent. Often, students forget how to use these instruments and struggle to perform their duties on the field. Such was the case with one of my interviewees; she and her teammates were briefly trained on how to use an optical instrument to diagnose patients' vision levels. However, when they arrived to the foreign country, they became overwhelmed and forgot how to use the instrument. They did not utilize the instrument properly, shining the light for too long in patients' eyes, and caused them to tear up and become uncomfortable at the clinic. In retrospect, my interviewee believes that these incidents could have been avoided if medical professionals were present with them on the field so they could offer their support and help if students forgot how to use the medical instruments properly.

There was also an interesting case where a student valued a fellow student's support over the support of her advisor. As opposed to her advisor, who had personal conflicts with some members of her team, this interviewee found the former president of her team to be very helpful in his support and guidance. The interviewee, who became the newly elected president, had difficulty communicating with the members of her organization. They preferred to communicate in a different platform, and were difficult to contact. She reached out to her former president, who had experience communicating with these members when he was president, and advised her on how to best communicate with them. He was even willing to be the middleman between her and certain members, and served to facilitate communication between them for some time.

Support, regardless of who it is from, is special. It is a fountain of advice and guidance that a team can dive into and reach for help when needed. From all of our interviews, it is evident that students in student-led organizations at CMU truly value support. Preference for different types of support may vary across students and organizations, but one thing remains clear: we all need support, because we cannot do things on our own.

Conclusion

Having now analyzed a wide array of case studies where Carnegie Mellon students have encountered very difficult teamwork experiences, we would like to implement our research by sharing it with the university's administration. The issues we have uncovered are not impossible — there are countless possibilities for solutions that students can use to improve their teamwork experiences. For example, setting up clear expectations and working across different levels of commitment can be aided through the application of team charters. Similarly, having members attend teamwork workshops, where they are trained to be more open minded, can help resolve trust and delegation issues. As something that could be put in practice by the Office of Student Leadership, Involvement, and Civic Engagement, it is our wish to push for exposure of these ideas for a better set of tools and strategies in handling the most frequent problems campus organizations face. We would like to encourage our readers to carefully think about our findings as discussed in this paper, and to creatively reflect on how these issues can be resolved for a more fulfilling student organizational life at our university.