

Seeking To Perceive More Than To Be Perceived

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Collaborative work is most efficient when the team is composed of just one member. No conflict, no discussion, one knows what they want and they act accordingly. As soon as the team grows into two or more members, new difficulties arise: working together, understanding others, deciding.

In order to pursue common endeavors, team members have to exchange a significant mass of information: technical knowledge, context knowledge and solution proposals. These pieces of information aren't always compatibles with each other. This is where conflicts arise – and frustration of seeing one's teammates going astray from the direction we'd like them to follow... or not doing anything when there are so many things to do!

The group will specialize one member into a directorial role. Or – a leader will emerge, more or less naturally. It looks like the system tends to want a unique head, a single chief. And why not? Some difficulties will seem to disappear then, since the leader decides for the group.

Let's pause a second. What's going on exactly?

Exchanging information within a team is expensive. Because those receiving information make sense out of it from their own experience (and not the experience of the person sending the information) team members need to invest a significant effort to hope to get understood. And misunderstandings are still possible then. On the top of spending time speaking and listening, people need to spend time making information redundant, checking frequently what the others have understood, and fix misunderstandings that have gone undetected so far. Just like software anomalies, the longer communication anomalies go undetected, the more expensive they are to fix.

Jim and Michele McCarthy describe this phenomenon in Software For Your Head as the “head gap.” The gap is what needs to be overcome every time team members dare to express an idea, invest energy into making it understandable for others, listen to others' new ideas, interpret them without judging them, understand them and accept or improve them.

Teamwork requires each one of these steps. In the same time, each step contributes to the global head gap cost, make the problem solving process more complex and compromise its success.

As much interesting an idea may sound to one team member, they learn through experience not to invest energy in it if they anticipate there's no chance the others accept it – unless at an exorbitant price (in time and energy) no one's ready to pay. So everyone keeps their “best” ideas to themselves.

Let's change the perspective.

What would happen if the head gap cost were zero?

All our ideas would get expressed and evaluated. We'd aim at our most ambitious goals. Even those seeming unreachable would get tried out.

The limit we face today isn't a lack of time or means. It's the price we have to pay to share our ideas with people who could help us implementing them.

Our goal shouldn't be to restrict the complexity of the problems we're trying to solve, or to limit the number of key decider roles – two strategies currently widely applied in corporate environments. Our goal should be to lower the head gap cost. To go along Eliyahu Goldratt's analysis, our goal is to increase the throughput between the moment we have an idea and the moment it's shared among the team for proper evaluation, adoption or improvement.

Contrarily to the prevailing common sense, some tools exist that allow reaching such a goal. We present three of them below in this handout.

- Investigate Protocol from the Core Protocols, McCarthy Technology
- Tadashi Suzuki's Soft Focus
- Marvin Harris's Emic Interviewing

These different approaches allow to increase the information throughput you may get from your teammates, which in turn will help you to enrich or complete your own ideas.

These tools seem easy to use and yet they're not. To help getting started, we may change right now the way we look at our teammates.

Competitors or conquerors? Saboteurs or subalterns? Sheltered or alienated? Reality is different. We're surrounded with competent persons, each one of them with valuable experience and knowledge. We may tap into this wealth to pursue with our teams the most ambitious projects we've ever imagined. And to find together the solution which exists already in each one's head.

Investigate protocol

- Become a detached but fascinated inquirer
- Ask only questions that will increase your understanding
- Don't ask inappropriate questions. For instance, avoid the following types of inquiries :
 - Questions that attempt to lead the interviewee or that reflect your agenda.
 - Questions that attempt to hide an answer you believe is true
 - Poorly thought-out questions.
 - Questions that invite the interviewee to wander off into too much analysis or irrelevant material. Questions that begin with "why" can spur this problem.
- Use few formulation for your questions
- Ask questions only if the interviewee is engaged and appears ready to learn more
- Give opinions rarely and only after receiving the interviewee's permission
- Don't talk anyone other than the interviewee.

Teams fail to share information effectively – instead, there is too much accusing, teaching, and telling, and very little listening. It is helpful to your teammates if you require deeply into their inner workings. Your inquiries are what they need. The answers to these questions lie within the heads and hearts of your teammates. They simply need your support in revealing and clarifying these answers.

Even when you think you know "what is wrong" with one of your teammates, you really don't. Telling that person or others "what is wrong" with him only result in cynicism and hurt feeling. If you really want your teammates to grow, support that person. Investigating his motivations and thoughts is one of the most beneficial acts of comradeship possible.

(Adapted from Jim & Michele McCarthy, Software For Your Head, Addison Welsey, New York, 2001, pages 236-241)

Soft focus

- Form a circle so that you may see everyone
- Relax
- Gaze at a point in space so that you can see everyone *at the same time* (without moving your eyes), even if in a blur

“*Soft focus* is a physical state in which the eyes are relaxed so that, rather than looking *at* a specific object or person, the individual allows visual information to *come to* her/him...

By taking the pressure off the eyes to be the dominant and primary information gatherer, the whole body starts to listen and gather information in new and more sensitized ways.

In a culture governed by commodities, consumption and the glorification of the individual, we are taught to target what we want and then find a way to get it. The way we use our eyes in daily life entails looking for what might satisfy our particular desires. When we are hungry, for example, we only see bakeries. We stroll past stores and restaurants mostly looking at what we want to buy or who we want to have. Like a hunter after a prey, our vision is narrowed down to a preconceived series of possibilities...

With *soft focus* [we] reverse our habitual directional focus and allow information to move *in* toward us. News *penetrates* our sensibilities.”

(Anne Bogart & Tina Landau, The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition, TCG, New York, 2005, pages 23, 31-32)

Emic interviewing

- Identify the behavior you want to understand.
- Approach the person without blame. Your purpose is to gather information, using the framework of “Teach me how you do this.” Get down to a very specific level of detail. When do you do this? When don’t you do this? How is it done? How do you know when it’s done right? What do you look for? What do you listen to?
- Test your understanding by trying out the behavior yourself and having the other person observe you and correct you, if necessary. (Actually, it’s *always* necessary.)

The emic interviewing method gives you data about people’s behavior. It always changes the person who gives you the information, often in profound ways by making them realize

- they can always observe themselves
- they are an expert in their own work
- they are okay and even interesting

(Adapted from Gerald M. Weinberg, Quality Software Management vol. 2: First-Order Measurement, Dorset House Publishing, New York, 1993, pages 223-224)