Working relationships, or relationships that work

When we succeed, we succeed together. Failure, though, is terribly lonely.
At all times, we are either building trust in each other, or letting it go; building potential for a shared future, or seeing it slip away.

It is no accident that there is a universal human response to the successful completion of a team effort: backslapping, joyful tears, triumphant raised arms, and hugs. When we work through something difficult together, we build a strong connection and reaffirmation of one another. There is a raw celebration and connection that happens when a team accomplishes its goals. From there, we enthusiastically engage to do something bigger and more important.

Likewise, when work does not go well, there is a mirror human response: downcast eyes, turning away, going the other way in the hall, and blame. When we fail, we fail alone. We avoid trying again with the same people.

What if we could more reliably capture the elements that lead to success? What if we could turn moments of failure into new resolve and deeper human connection? What if our everyday work experiences, in the face of both success and failure, could offer the possibility of improving our collaborative relationships?

Our work relationships are the consequence of how well we work together, not the cause. No matter how much we like someone else, it is only after we have endeavored to accomplish a goal together that we experience a deepening of our working relationship. We understand this intuitively, as we open new business dealings with smaller tasks that we use to evaluate whether to go further. Does this person reliably show up for a coffee? Has my email been answered? Have we successfully negotiated a format for the next meeting? Each of these very small shared tasks give us insights into the potential for a larger relationship, and we watch the relationship develop almost unconsciously as we move along to larger and larger goals.

Let’s call the conversations and handoffs among people collaborating together a *workflow*. Workflow requires at least two people: the customer, who wishes to see a task accomplished, and a performer, who is taking on the assignment.

The task, however, is just a means to an end, a way in which a larger *concern* is being met. The concern is not a worry, but rather the *what* behind the *how* of the workflow. Identifying and understanding what actually matters to the customer is the critical difference between a merely adequate and a truly great workflow.

It is a *flow* because it is continuous, connected, embedded, fractal. We have small tasks within larger tasks and tasks flowing into other tasks. These create a growing context that continues forward, creating a network of dependencies and interconnections that are the foundations of the emerging trust and greater work we are able to do together

So, how do you establish great workflow?

Prerequisite skills

Impeccability in communication and workflows is both impossible and always our highest intention. When embarking on a more thoughtful course to become masterful with workflow, you will need to pay attention to some foundational skills.

The first is listening. Listening is not merely hearing the words from another, but engaging in deeper understanding. Often we are simply waiting for the other person to get done with what they have to say so we can get on with what we want to contribute. Our heads are busy with internal conversations, debating and judging, planning our next statements. So little, if any of our consciousness is centered on our hearts where real listening occurs.

Without really listening, we will not be able to successfully discover concerns, allow for authentic dialogue that permits and uncovers disagreements, or truly appreciate one another. On the other hand, taking the moments to patiently be present with those with whom we work pays great dividends in bringing the best out of everyone so that we love the work we are doing together.

The next skill is self-reflection. Unless we are willing to take time out and examine what is truly important to us, and to recognize ourselves where we need help and where we are strong, we will not be able to authentically share that information with others, and that will hinder our ability to succeed in our work with others. If we can explore what is in our hearts, it is much easier to know and reveal what is behind our requests. This deeper authenticity builds deeper respect and connection with those who are helping us accomplish our goals.

Discipline and promise keeping is the third foundational skill. Whether we lack the raw competence to manage our time, or whether we get casual with some commitments if we find that they aren't as important to us, we need to be accountable for the promises we make to others. The degree to which we deem another human being as trustworthy will govern how much work we will do together, and how efficiently that work will be done.

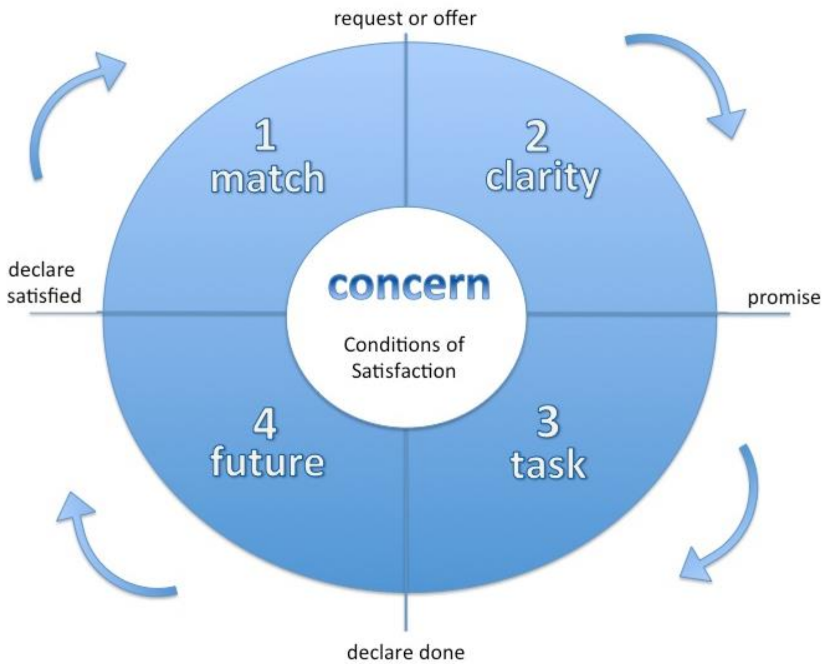
Finally, we need to excel in sharing our assessments about what is going on. We are vulnerable to becoming judging machines that are quick to criticize and complain. Without a deep connection to our own hearts, most every thought we have is an evaluation of what is out there. Do we like it or not? What will we do to change it into something that we prefer? Are we sharing the assessments for the sake of the future, or just griping? Are we remembering to share what has worked well?

There is an art to making useful assessments; ones that come from the heart and that are respectfully honest. These actually strengthen our relationships, as we care enough about each other to work towards a better future. Since much of what we do during a workflow involves sharing viewpoints about what is happening, having deeper skills here make the inherent negotiation and evaluation much more effective.

Don't worry if you are stronger at some of these skills and weaker at others. Practicing them during your real workflows will help you get better. What is key is that you must appreciate their importance and you must engage willingly in developing those skills.

Wherever your starting point is, you will experience immediate benefits in following workflow practices, simply by paying attention to the phases of workflow. We all learn by doing.

What happens in "workflow"[1]?



The Phases of Workflow

Workflow consists of four phases. Each phase takes care of something different, and later phases are thus dependent on results from earlier phases. The phase distinction is there to remind you of prerequisites and important work. Skipping phases is commonplace in most organizations and that is where much of the workflow mischief occurs.

However, please note a caution about oversimplifying. Workflow doesn't come in a convenient format, where we neatly complete one phase and move inexorably forward to the next. Rather, we may determine at points that what had been accomplished in a prior phase is now no longer sufficient to support us in the current phase. In that case we drop back and revisit what we need in order to move forward successfully again. Conceivably we might even go back a couple of phases. The key is noticing if the foundation is still adequate to complete what we have in front of us.

[1] The concepts of workflow come from the work of Dr. Fernando Flores, and this interpretation is distributed under the rights granted by Dr. Flores under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (http://creativecommons.org/licensesby/3.0).

Each phase has a primary aim as indicated on the diagram.

Phase 1 takes care of ***ensuring the match*** between the customer and performer is likely to succeed. It ends with a request from the customer or an offer from the performer to do the work.
Phase 2 takes care of ***negotiating the clarity*** about the work to be done, ensuring that there is a meeting of the minds between the customer and the performer. This phase ends with a promise from the performer to engage in the agreed upon work.
Phase 3 takes care of ***accomplishing the task***. It ends when the performer declares that they are done.
Phase 4 takes care of the ***improving the future***, that is, the next workflows, either with this same customer/performer pair, or with future workflow partners. Assessments are shared about the workflow in order to inform and improve the next go around. This phase ends with a declaration of satisfaction from the customer, Satisfaction does not mean it all went well, but rather an acknowledgment that the workflow is complete and that all relevant assessments for the future have been exchanged.

Precisely in the center, the focus and intent behind every phase, is the ***concern*** held by the customer. The concern is made tangible, concrete and specific by the ***conditions of satisfaction*** that are developed and realized during the course of the workflow. To fully appreciate the workflow phases, we must start by deepening understanding of the concern.

Getting to Concern: What is being taken care of?

Understanding concerns unlocks flexibility. Once a performer can see how the task fits into a larger concern, they have the opportunity to collaborate to redesign or propose novel ways of meeting the concern that may not include the task requested. They can better understand the conditions of satisfaction, and the priorities that might be at play. Since performers may often have expertise that the customer lacks, this is a chance to leverage those skills to improve outcomes. After all, this is a small investment in a conversation to discover what is at the heart of a need.

Revealing concerns builds respect. Sharing the deeper need builds trust and respect between the customer and the performer. And as work relationships mature, deeper levels of authenticity become the cornerstone of the pursuit of larger and more meaningful aspirations.

How do you discover the concern? One technique is to continue to ask “what is important to you” about the task, until you delve into more interesting territory. Notice that the question is “what” and not “why.” Asking why will often lead you astray of the concern and into conversations that have nothing to do with the central concern.

Let's take a straightforward workflow very familiar to many of us. It starts with a simple request: "Could you get me a cup of coffee?" Now, most of us would skip right to the facts. Starbucks? Grande one pump vanilla soy latte extra hot? Done. Walk down to the Starbucks line and presto, task complete.

But what about possible concerns? Asking, "what is important to you about your cup of coffee" might reveal a variety of different answers. Certainly, there are those that are taking care of being awake in the morning, those that are using coffee for breakfast nutrition, those that help their transition from home to work using a ritual of coffee drinking, those that enjoy the community at the coffee shop and want the sense of belonging, and those who might want to increase their prestige by flaunting a brand-name coffee cup.

What might be important about knowing those concerns? Suppose the Starbucks was flooded due to a broken machine. Your customer is in a critical meeting, and going back to renegotiate the coffee details really seems disruptive. So what do you do?

Understanding the concern might help you, as the performer, make a good alternative choice. If it is the brand that is important, then you hoof it down a few blocks to the next Starbucks. If it is caffeine, then you cross to the diner and pick up a standard cup of joe and get it right upstairs before too much work happens in a semi-conscious state. If it is breakfast nutrition, you pick up the plain coffee and a breakfast sandwich to go along. If it is community, then likely the customer might not even have asked you for the coffee, but just wanted you to drop by and give birthday wishes to the favorite barista, and you could just return empty handed.

A little contrived? Perhaps it is. But you would be very surprised by how assumptive we are about concerns in much bigger workflows. We often cast our own concerns into the center, and then take actions based on faulty premises or what we would want to be taking care of if it was our request. Just a few moments at the start can be extremely illuminating and open up great possibilities for better workflow performance.

At the start, you may need to ask the question "what is important to you" several times in a row, until you arrive at the actual, most meaningful concern. With practice, you will be much more adept at weaving the concern questions into conversation, and listening to discover what they are. When you know someone well, you can often just ask the confirming question, "Is this what is important about the task?"

Concerns are typically not measurable. They sound like "building a more trusting relationship with this client" or "enjoying myself" or "establishing myself in a new community" or "gaining credibility" or "pursuing world peace." Lofty or pedestrian, they still are meaningful enough to the customer that they are asking for help.

Conditions of satisfaction

The conditions of satisfaction provide the tangible evidence that will be used to determine if the work has met the agreed upon expectations. These might include how the work is done, what the work product looks like, how interactions will take place during the work, the logistics surrounding the work, or any other specifications that the customer deems significant to the task.

A useful question for the performer to ask is how these conditions of satisfaction relate to the underlying concern. This can help the performer understand why they are significant, or set priorities among the different conditions. Often this conversation can reveal deeper nuances about the concern, or change the mutual understanding of the concern. Sometimes conditions are asserted that, after examination, may not be as important to the customer as once thought. Intentional comparison of conditions to concerns is invaluable, especially in larger workflows.

The more objectively these conditions of satisfaction can be described, the better the chance that they will be achieved.

Consider a possible request: please have that full report on competitive salaries on my desk by Monday noon. Not bad in being explicit about when and where. But how often does that report then arrive in a disappointing state? Let's suppose our workflow-savvy performer has discovered that the ultimate underlying concern is providing more equitable compensation, perhaps motivated by recent complaints by employees and worries from the HR department How then does this concern get reflected in conditions of satisfaction?

Starting with the concern, our hero may start to ask some questions connecting the work product with the concern. How will this report be used to help provide more equitable compensation? Now the busy customer may disclose that it will be used to make an initial assessment of whether inequities exist in a particular department. Again, our performer persists. Used how, and by whom? The customer now clarifies that it is just for their personal benefit, trying to build some basic background for a meeting later in the day with upper management. The performer can now extend the offer, perhaps because they have more experience in compensation. Do you want just the salary data, or would you like some basic information about how to analyze salaries in regards to equity? Do you want comparatives tied to our current salaries?

Perhaps more significantly, now the performer has some better idea of what will actually satisfy the need. A simple salary survey, plucked from a standard report, is not going to fill the need. However, the report can be written informally, perhaps as bullet lists, and might be accompanied by some reading material. Certainly, more questions are necessary, such as how much time will the customer have to read prior to their meeting. But you can see how time has now been saved and the customer is much more likely to get what is needed. The performer also has a much better idea of the time and energy involved, and can then help better assess their competence to act.

In the end, this customer may care most about being able to properly represent the current situation to upper management, and to be prepared to suggest the next steps to take. Good to know.

Note, our performer still isn't done, but getting closer. The clarification takes time, but is well worth the effort. The rest of the conversation is left as an exercise for the reader.

Often-overlooked conditions are those regarding the workflow management itself. That is, how often will you check in with progress? What flags are you watching for that trigger a renegotiation of the workflow? What is the specific timeline?

We rely heavily on unspoken shared assumptions in developing conditions of satisfaction. This certainly makes workflow more efficient, since we do not have to be comprehensive in our discussions. However, sometimes the customer and performer come from very different organizations or backgrounds. If we fail to acknowledge that at the outset, we may be disappointed partway through to find that our unspoken assumptions are wildly divergent!

Consider the different backgrounds that might confound discussion: engineers working with artists, Italians working with the Germans, volunteer groups working with business people, and baby boomers working with GenX-ers. Just consider what "get back to me tomorrow" might mean for each of these groups.

It is only after both the customer and the performer have come to a good mutual understanding of the conditions of satisfaction, that the performer is able to make a genuine promise for delivery.

Phases of workflow

Ensuring the Match

In this phase, the customer is looking for a match with a performer. The customer may consider and pass on a variety of potential performers. Also, just because the customer has the need, it doesn't mean that they are necessarily the active party in the hunt. Occasionally the performer may notice something that the customer needs and make an offer to help.

At the outset, the customer must get very clear what the concern is that they are taking care of. Without this foundational piece, much of the rest of the workflow may be compromised, as the remainder builds on the concern.

In making a successful match, the quality of the current relationship is very significant. Big workflows need deep trusting relationships of mutual respect. If you don't yet have enough of a relationship with a potential performer, start with a smaller workflow.

Listening is an essential skill! Recruiting performers is not a "sell job", but a selective process that should result in a genuine match, with both the customer and performer motivated to engage in the work together.

The big job of the customer in locating possible performers involves making good assessments in four domains about the performer:
- Do they have the necessary competence?
- Do they have available and sufficient capacity?
- Will they have the required political authority?
- What is their view of the future?

Making good assessments of competence is important to helping ensure the performer's success. When the customer is already adept in accomplishing the type of task that is required, this may be straightforward. However, more times than not, the performer will actually be more skilled than the customer. For example, the project manager may have a high-level understanding of software development, while the programmer would be an expert. Recognition of this situation, along with frank back-and-forth dialogue, can help ensure that this is cared for, even when there is a big gap in the customer's ability to assess competence.

Being too narrow in assessing competence is another pitfall. The potential performer may be the recognized expert in the subject matter, but may lack competence in other areas necessary to successful completion, such as time management. In fact, sometimes, required competence is not discovered until the conditions of satisfaction are being outlined in the next phase, which then motivates a brief return into the match phase to reconfirm that the performer is a good choice.

Customers must not take for granted that the performer, although clearly competent to perform the work, has the time or energy to do so. Checking in with what else is going on with a performer is both respectful and wise at this stage. Spending a lot of time clarifying a task with someone who will then confess an inability to complete the task anytime soon will be frustrating. A check in Phase 1 will save that effort.

Capacity is not just about time. Is the performer in good physical and emotional condition for the demands of the work? If the task requires creativity or highly focused attention, there may also need to be some "whitespace" around the work to accommodate the results desired.

Ensuring political authority, whether it be by title or community recognition, is sometimes essential to enable even the most competent and available performer. We all know of times when an "outsider" was suddenly thrust into a position of authority over a group, only to have the group itself fail to acknowledge that authority. This can happen quite subtly, with benign neglect by possible performers to engage in workflow, or outright mutiny. And political authority may be derived by title, degree, or community recognition. What must be assessed is what the community will *actually use* to grant authority, not what they ought to accept.

Finally, who can resist a performer that is well qualified, has a surfeit of time and energy, and has broad community recognition of authority? Well, if that performer has a persistent pessimistic point of view about the future from past attempts at similar workflows that will undermine the current workflow, then the customer must address this directly. Tempting as it is to brush the worries away about the persistent negative language and attitude, or the entrenched apathy, of a given performer, the customer does so at their own peril. Uncovering limiting assumptions and confirming highest intentions at this phase will pay back your time investment with dividends later.

This phase culminates with either a request by the customer or an offer by the performer to consider doing the task, with the expectation that the next phase will clarify the work and either result in a promise or a decline.

Negotiating the Clarity

Once a customer and performer match is made, it makes sense to invest the time in a deeper discussion about the work to be done to develop clarity. That clarity is reflected in the conditions of satisfaction for the workflow.

Conditions of satisfaction are a *negotiation* between the customer and the performer, not a fiat from the customer! Much damage is done to morale in organizational life when a boss, acting as customer, believes their authority justifies pouring on more and more assignments to people who believe they have no right to negotiate and have their concerns considered. You enter the danger zone of dissatisfaction when no room is given for an authentic back and forth about what is possible to achieve. The clarity discussion is also the place where the performer identifies any support needed from the customer in order to commit to the workflow. In addition, the assessments that the customer made during the match process are used to tailor the workflow to the performer's competence, capacity and political authority.

Conditions describe the end state of the workflow. That is, what will be the state of the world that is desired once the task is completed? A condition is a result, a concluding circumstance, a final state of being. Nota bene for the reader: the conditions are *not the set of activities* that will be used to accomplish the work!

To ensure that the ending conditions are objective enough for the customer and performer to have a mutually satisfying assessment of the work completed, there are a variety of techniques for assisting in clarifying conditions of satisfaction or results. One is using S.M.A.R.T. criteria[2] which stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Trackable. Walking through each end-state condition and outlining how it meets the SMART criteria is a quick way to ensure much better clarity.

Certain conditions may govern the work tasks themselves, and not just the end product. For example, the customer may have as a condition of satisfaction that they have been kept aware at all times of the current state of the project sufficient to identify if the project is making timely progress. Making this result SMART might entail defining the format and frequency of a status report.

Customers should aspire for an authentic commitment, or promise, at the end of this phase. For this to happen, customers must be open to performers declining to commit, counter-offering, and asking for more time, that is, committing to declare their commitment at a later moment. One effective way to ensure reliable commitments is for the customer to make an explicit statement at the start of the clarity phase that identifies decline, commit to commit, and counteroffers as viable options. Then the tenor of the negotiation must continue to be accepting of those possibilities, and not subtly shift to pressure or presumption. This approach is particularly important in workflows where the customer is in a superior or power position relative to the performer.

The clarity phase ends with a promise from the performer to do the task and achieve the conditions of satisfaction. A promise is not like a vow, but rather an authentic commitment to work towards the conditions of satisfaction as a sincere priority. Promises are open during the next phase for renegotiation, as emerging information may affect the performer's ability to produce the conditions of satisfaction. If that occurs, then the customer and performer drop back again into the clarity conversation, and work towards a new promise.

[2] November 1981 issue of *Management Review* by George T. Doran

Accomplishing the Task

This is where the work happens. Ensuring that the task is still on track is a mutual accountability. Having solid conditions of satisfaction, following SMART, will help with assessing progress.

This phase ends with a declaration of assignment completed from the performer.

Improving the Future

If you desire no further work or relationship with your performer, feel free to skip this phase! Otherwise, pay close attention. This phase is where assessments are shared for the sake of the future; preserving what we want again and learning to improve next time.

We are human beings with a longing to connect with and contribute to others. As such, we repeat behaviors that we are encouraged or rewarded, and we discard behaviors that receive no feedback or get negative responses. Forestall your tendencies to gallop through this phase with your best performers. If you don't stop and take a moment to appreciate what worked, your performers may very well change behaviors next time around to get feedback! This may not be what you desire.

If the customer and performer have done their job in the clarity phase, much of the discussion here is quite straightforward, and the content of most of the relevant assessments are laid out already. If not, you have the opportunity to learn a bit more about clarity discussions for next time.

Of course, if the performer declares done, but the customer has a different opinion, the partnership may well drop back into the Task phase again. Once this phase is complete, both parties agree that the work is done.

This phase ends with a declaration of satisfaction from the customer.

Dual workflow

Workflow has been introduced as if it were a one-way street from a customer to a performer. However, there is always a secondary, or dual, workflow that exists, where the roles of customer and performer are reversed.

The performer in the primary workflow is holding a concern that is satisfied by engaging in the workflow. This concern is no less important, and it also has its own set of conditions of satisfaction. Making these as explicit as those in the primary workflow is a powerful recognition of mutual respect between the customer and the performer. It is helpful for the customer in the primary workflow to know what engages the performer, and will be a good tool for checking on the likely level of commitment of the performer.

There is no reason that all of the conditions of satisfaction, both for the primary and the secondary workflow, cannot be captured in the same place.

Beware the workflow where the only concern held by the performer is one of extrinsic value! For example, if your performer's concern is the paycheck alone, you, as the customer, may want to find another performer. Intrinsic concerns, like working towards the vision or mission of your organization, are much more powerful motivators. Building a personal vision with the performer is often as easy as connecting their workflow to that larger purpose.

Even in the most minor workflows, like getting coffee, you can relate to the larger context. If the customer requires coffee to be in top form to negotiate a grant proposal from a critical donor, then the coffee, and therefore the performer, can be seen as contributing, however incrementally, to the larger purpose. Seeing that the performer's ultimate goal may be keeping their customer in best physical and emotional condition can be much more inspiring than seeing themselves as mechanical or transactional task doers.

This view also opens up a realm of opportunity for both sides to experience more connection and fulfillment in work together.

Counterintuitive mantras

The customer is accountable for performer success. Wait, isn't the performer supposed to be the accountable party?

The customer holds the concern, not the performer. It is the customer that decides whether or not to entrust the task to the performer. It is the customer that accepts the conditions of satisfaction. It is the customer's role to make sure that, at all times, the performer will be successful.

What if it becomes clear that the performer will not be able to meet the conditions of satisfaction, or in a larger sense is uninspired by the organizational concerns such as vision and mission? The customer must take action to renegotiate the workflow, find or a new performer or even end the relationship in the most respectful way possible. If the customer has made poor assessments about the performer's ability and willingness to get the task done, that is the customer's accountability.

Finally, apply this notion to the dual workflow. As the performer in the primary cycle, you are accountable for ensuring that your concerns, whether they be salary, appreciation, autonomy or development, are met as a consequence.

Remember, the customer always holds the concern.

Performer chooses customer. Doesn't the customer choose the performer? Actually, no, not in the deepest sense. The performer is at will. Unless they have genuinely signed up for the organizational vision and mission, and feel they have some authority to negotiate their workflows, and chosen to do the task in collaboration with the customer, you will not get what you expect. Much mischief happens here, as customers assume, due to power relationships or assumptive listening, that they control the free choice of a performer.

Always, genuine accountability is granted by the performer. It is an outdated notion that it could be otherwise. Recognizing this, and knowing that every human being wants the experience of interconnectedness with others and appreciation for their contribution, it is the job of the customer to assess whether the performer's concerns are considered and well matched to the organizational vision and mission, and whether they are "at choice" when making a promise. The good news is that the stronger the tie between the performer's concerns and the realization of the workflow, the deeper the performer's commitment.

Making assessments

Providing colleagues with excellent assessments is a prime opportunity to improve your workflows. Much of what is exchanged between a customer and a performer are judgments about what is happening. Having a framework for making those effective will bolster performance across the workflow phases.

To start, there is a critical difference between an assessment and an assertion. An assertion is a fact that is accepted by the community (i.e. the report was delivered later than promised). Each community may differ in its set of facts, but all members must agree that it is a fact for it to be accepted as an assertion. Assertions are one of the building blocks of assessments. The need for the distinction is that there is a great tendency to treat assessments (i.e. your lack of concern for getting the report submitted on time hurt our credibility) as if they are assertions. This will confound discussion and can often be a source of conflict.

In particular, assessments are held by an individual, and are open for revision. In that sense, they are not right or wrong, and they may be accurate or inaccurate.   Assessments are most effectively regarded as useful or not useful or empowering or disempowering.

A grounded assessment has the following information:

- An empowering intention that answers “For the sake of what?”
- Scope or domain that ensures relevance
- Timeframe
- Standards
- Assertions
- Future action enabled

A great appreciation is always a grounded assessment, as is a useful suggestion for improvement.

There is actually much more to say about assessments than can be captured here effectively. Further reading and practice here is very much recommended.[3]

When it goes awry...

There are some common patterns of workflow failures. Recognizing these may help you diagnose long-standing issues you may have in your existing workflows.

A frequent tendency is the wholesale skipping of the Negotiating for Clarity and Improving the Future phases. We jump from Ensuring the Match to Accomplishing the Task and back again. It is easy to take short cuts like, “Aha, we’ve found a performer. Here is the task. Great, you are done here is the next task.” The performer will eventually feel like a tool and not a partner, often left guessing as to what will satisfy the customer and underappreciated in the transactional communication process. The customer can’t figure out why the same problems occur each time or why they are regularly disappointed or surprised in the results.

For regular, repetitive work, we tend to spend all the time in the Task phase. There are no breathing points where the workflow is assessed and new negotiations occur. Performers simply disappear from view, and the customer-performer relationship wanes as a consequence. This pattern can lead to a slow decline in the quality of the work, as no feedback is received to encourage its continuation or improvement.

Customers can truly subvert the clarity phase by guilt-tripping a performer into acquiescence or dictating activities rather than results. Both of these diminish respect for the performer, who will sometimes be motivated to withhold their concerns or feelings and use passive neglect in the completion of the task.

[3] The Holding Others Accountable and Wisdom Group Guidelines in LionHeart’s Mastering Effectiveness Study Guide offer further details about how to provide empowering assessments.

Some of us enjoy mindreading, which fails in interesting ways. Imaginative conditions of satisfaction can lead a performer to enhance, extend and embellish the result way beyond expectations. This simply adds a time and cost penalty that increases waste. Customers sometimes supply interesting motivations for their performers, rewarding them in ways that make no sense against the concerns they actually hold. Perhaps surprisingly, if a performer is motivated to help out of a sense of mission or charity, and is then paid for their time, it can rob them of the very experience they were seeking.

The workflow model is designed to provide a diagnostic framework that can be used to examine what has happened and guide what can happen more effectively the next time. Seize the opportunity to pay careful attention when it goes horribly wrong! Those lessons can be especially helpful if you apply them to the times where it goes just so-so, where your motivation to take out the workflow and examine it might just not be as strong.

A note about time

Yes, it takes more time in the beginning, as with any skill. But the time spent in executing good workflow is more than returned by reduced rework and more meaningful and successful working relationships.

Also, repeated workflows with the same customer and performer will become more efficient naturally, because the concerns are already understood and the conditions of satisfaction are reusable. Just be certain to not fall into skipping the clarity and future phases as a consequence!

Building this into everything you do

Meetings are a great way to start implementing these tools and philosophy of empowerment. They encompass a full workflow all by themselves. Start a meeting by checking in with everyone to ensure that you have ready performers and customers; confirm the concerns held and the conditions of satisfaction for the meeting; solicit an explicit promise to produce those results; and finally, do a wrap-up at the end and sharing assessments for the sake of future meetings.

In point of fact, most of the time we have no idea who is the customer for a meeting. It makes an interesting question, “Whose meeting is this and what are we committed to taking care of?”

When you apply workflow practices explicitly to your meetings (favorite and otherwise)... you will be pleasantly surprised!

Conclusion

You are not at the mercy of your customer or performer. You have the power to create the conditions for the peak experience of collaborative excellence you aspire to achieve. Having more of what you want, and less of what you don't, is within possibility, even if you are the only one with the workflow model in your mind. You can guide the workflow process with respectful questions as either the customer or the performer, and raise the right conversations to enable better results.

Being intentionally effective with workflow practices will create the environment so that your team can be "in the zone" on a much more regular basis. Finally, workflow benefits can be found in every portion of your life, from work to home to community. Practice opportunities are plentiful! Enjoy!