Collaborative Intimacy
From Good to Great Collaboration

Abstract

The business literature is replete with papers, book and other publications that attempt to explain high-functioning teams. These writings describe how aspects of trust, disclosure and mutual respect are important ingredients in the team-building recipe. This paper asserts that intimacy is the primary social ingredient and that intimate is the primary social and cognitive state of high functioning teams. The impact of intimacy among individuals and the group-as-a-whole is explored.

Terms:
Collaborative intimacy, willingness testing, good collaboration, Scrum, intellectual intercourse, social intercourse, cognitive intimacy, intimate state, perception mechanics, intimacy accelerators

Self-organizing Teams

Successful work means successful teamwork in most organizations. The topic of teamwork is a popular one in business books. Some writers discuss trust as a primary ingredient of teams. Still other books and publications on interpersonal relationships stress the need for mutual disclosure and mutual vulnerability (“openness”) in healthy relations between people. While all of these qualities are important, they avoid or otherwise omit discussion of any intimacy in teams. Intimacy plays an important role in high functioning teams.

Some definitions of intimacy include:

☐ familiarity: close or warm friendship; "the absence of fences created a mysterious intimacy in which no one knew privacy"
☐ closeness: a feeling of being intimate and belonging together;

Source: Google http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&source=hp&q=define%3A+intimacy&aq=f&oq=&aqi=g2g-m1

Intimacy in teams that write software is especially important. The creation of software is a learning experience, at the individual and group level. The individual learning often takes place in with (and in front of) a group of people. Further most software developers
have a very strong need to be right. Being wrong can mean embarrassment and ‘loss of face’. Programmers and technical people perceive, perhaps correctly, that they get paid for “right answers”. To provide a “wrong” answer therefore is risky. These risks are impediments to individual learning which in turn impedes the collective learning of the team at the group level. Intimate teams are teams that learn rapidly. Intimate teams can become highly adaptive and rapidly achieve a hyper-productive state.

Software teams are complex. These teams build an abstract deliverable, software. This deliverable work product is typically built in teams. As such, software teams are useful to study, because the work is actually mostly learning, and the learning is as a group. Software construction is a cognitive act at the level of group or team. Thus software development is a laboratory for learning about how to marshal and deploy highly integrated teams. This paper asserts that intimacy is an essential ingredient inside such teams. The lessons of intimacy on software teams are applicable to all kinds of teams outside of the software development domain. Software teams face a complex task. Software teams need to hold a shared mental model of the work in advance of executing the work in any meaningful way. For this reason software teams are special.

Intimacy is a requirement for high-functioning software teams because of the learning aspect. The Scrum\textsuperscript{i} framework provides a set of ground rules that encourage production of software-- at the expense of waste. Scrum does not describe how teams “self organize”. However, the framework explicitly defines specific authority, tasks and boundaries for the role of ‘Team’, “Product Owner” and “Scrum Master”. Through these and other Scrum features, the Scrum framework creates an environment where team intimacy is strongly encouraged as a norm. Submission to these Scrum ground rules on the part of all team members often leads to team-level intimacy. This intimacy in turn leads to a collaborative culture and the potential for reaching a truly hyper-productive state.

**Communication, Cooperation, Collaboration**

Getting to the intimate state with a team or with an individual is a process-- with a velocity or rate. The rate of intimacy growth can be increased via specific practices described at the end of this paper.

The intimate state requires trust, disclosure, and vulnerability. This introduces various risks for the individual, including potential embarrassment or “loss of face” in front of the other individual or the group or team. Intimacy therefore is not simple to arrive at and requires a progression towards communication and cooperation. This provides the potential for intimacy and collaboration.
Communication

Communication between individuals on teams and also group-level communication is an absolute requirement for teams. Dysfunctional teams exhibit low volume, low quality and low frequency of communication between individuals and the group-as-a-whole. If a person is unwilling to communicate, they may be and probably are uncomfortable cooperating. The unwillingness to communicate blocks any potential cooperation. Effective communication therefore is the first step in the progression towards the intimate state, and collaboration.

Cooperation

Cooperation is the next step following effective communication. Note that cooperation does not require intimacy per se. I can engage in a transaction with you and cooperate towards the goal of completing a transaction without collaborating-- or being intimate. This is typical in business and commerce. Cooperation can be and often is completely impersonal. However cooperation is still a necessary prerequisite to collaboration and intimacy. If a person or group is unwilling to cooperate, the reason might be a total unwillingness to collaborate. Any unwillingness to cooperate impedes any potential collaboration and intimacy.

Collaboration

Collaboration is the act of working jointly on a common goal. Collaboration can occur between individuals, between individuals in groups, and between groups. A requirement of effective collaboration is efficient and productive cooperation. Effective collaboration requires intimate knowledge of the working style, temperament and personality of the other person, or group.

Collaboration is in fact intellectual and social intercourse. The term intercourse associates with sexuality. Some definitions include:

- communication between individuals
- Communication, conversation; Dealings between countries; Dealings with people, including commerce and trade

Source: Google [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&source=hp&q=define%3A+intercourse&aq=f&oq=&aqi=g1](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&source=hp&q=define%3A+intercourse&aq=f&oq=&aqi=g1)

Intercourse and intimacy are connotatively associated with human sexuality. It is useful to notice that these terms do not have a denotation or definition that is completely sexual however. In other words, intercourse and intimacy need not be sexual per se.
Collaboration and sex by mutual consent share certain properties in common.

To understand the apparent relationship between collaboration and sex more completely, perhaps it is best to observe our close cousins, the bonobo apes.

**Bonobo Apes: Small-group Society, Norms and Intimacy**

Bonobo apes are notorious for having frequent sex with many individuals who are members in the same social group. These apes are social animals who appear to use intercourse as a social device, similar to a handshake, hug or kiss in human social terms. These apes use sexual contact to resolve actual or pending conflict, to communicate, to relieve social anxiety and to set the stage for social cooperation.

Linda Rising in the agile software community brought the social sexuality of these apes to the attention of the agile software community at the Agile2006 conference. Are these apes in fact engaging in sexual intercourse the way humans engage in collaborative, intellectual and social intercourse? Perhaps. In both cases social intimacy is an essential factor.

With these animals, sex is more of an intimate “social handshake”, or act of mutual agreement to cooperate socially (if not collaborate). Humans use other social devices to accomplish the same thing. We test for and process implicit and explicit “willingness signals” from others. We seek and obtain clear working agreements to cooperate and collaborate. This creates similar social cohesion, in humans, at the individual and group levels.

**Willingness to Collaborate**

The self-organization of software teams is in fact a process of ‘getting to collaboration’. When teams are in a full collaborative mode, they have by definition reached the hyper-productive state. There is trust, openness, respect, focus and safety. There is also familiarity and closeness. This is intimacy.

Various tools such as the Scrum framework encourage but do not guarantee that teams make rapid progress towards a collaborative, socially and intellectually intimate, ultimately “hyper-productive” state.

**Willingness to be Intimate**
Intimacy is central to collaboration. Willingness is central to intimacy. Willingness is defined as “cheerful compliance” to do something.

If a person is unwilling to communicate, that means they are also unwilling to cooperate. Likewise if a person is unwilling to cooperate, then they are also unwilling to collaborate. Willingness is at the root of genuine and authentic intimacy. If two persons demonstrate mutual willingness to collaborate, then the collaboration is authentic. If on the other hand one party is unwilling to collaborate, then any “collaboration” between the parties is in fact experienced as manipulation and coercion by the unwilling partner.

When viewed this way, what is clear is that willingness is at the root of all collaborative work. Expressed willingness is explicit consent. Intimacy fosters willingness to actively participate in mutual work; a culture of intimacy fosters teamwork as a group norm. Unwillingness to have familiarity and closeness by and between team members is an impediment to reaching the hyper-productive state.

Intimacy matters where teams are concerned.

**Willingness Testing**

Real collaboration between persons requires at least some intellectual and/or social intimacy. The intimate state is reached when both parties signal willingness to work in a “zone” or “field” of trust, vulnerability, openness, mutual accommodation and respect. This is intimacy.

To be intimate with one or more people, all the parties must first be willing. To be respectful, you must also frequently test the other parties for willingness. A question as simple as “are you willing?” is all that is needed to test for willingness. It is useful to point out that silence or the lack of an explicit answer back constitutes implicit consent in many cultures. However, on teams, explicit answers are required for willingness testing because of essential boundary and authority issues. Willingness testing confirms and respects implicit and explicit boundaries.

**Willingness Testing and Boundaries**

Willingness testing is a respectful examination and/or re-examination of boundaries. If you test for willingness and the other person say nothing or “no”, respect the boundary now. You may perhaps ask some questions to clarify the response. Disrespect for the personal boundaries of others is a form of attempted manipulation, coercion and control. None of this is conducive to teamwork. Such behavior is in fact evident in the norms of highly dysfunctional teams. The need for frequent willingness testing potentially leads to the generation of wasted energy inside teams. This is energy that is no longer available for the executing on the stated task. However if boundaries are clearly specified,
understood and adhered to, willingness testing consumes very little energy. Poorly specified and poorly understood boundaries generate lots of waste. This is because energy that might be available for productive work is instead consumed by the constant need for boundary discovery.

**Authentic Intimacy**

In the absence of willingness there is no authentic intimacy and therefore no potential for collaboration. Collaborative behavior is a manifestation of the “hyper-productive” state described by Dr. Jeff Sutherland, Ken Schwaber and others in the agile/Scrum community.

On the other hand-- if the other party are willing, and they say so, and there is nothing further to do. The stage is set for good collaboration, now. *Good collaboration* requires mutual consent, trust, openness, and respect.

Good collaboration is satisfying and fun.

Note that ‘openness” and “respect” are Scrum values. In my view this is no accident and in fact a deliberate design feature of Scrum. The creators of Scrum know exactly what they are doing.

**Good Collaboration**

*Good collaboration* occurs when both parties are ready, willing and able to work jointly on some item of work. Here both parties signal strong willingness during willingness testing and are ready to work with full consent and mutual authorization. Both parties have enough information about each other’s boundaries to work comfortably, without the need to discover or rediscover these boundaries. Instead, everyone involved is focusing on the stated task—the work at hand—rather than boundary issues. For this to occur, boundaries must be clearly specified, agreed upon, and adhered to. This is exactly what goes on inside healthy and productive teams. The same can be said for all healthy relationships between persons, business divisions, business enterprises, and larger social structures. “Good collaboration” is intimate and absolutely requires mutual consent.

Teams who are intimate have the potential to be cognitively intimate. In this state, most team members understand the cognitive styles of most all other team members and can sense and anticipate how other members perceive communications, and new information. Cognitively intimate team members can sense and anticipate individual and group-level misunderstandings in the perception of new material, and quickly intervene to clarify, leading to more rapid understanding at the group level. Cognitive intimacy is a product or result of effective empathy.
Some definitions of empathy include:

- understanding and entering into another's feelings

- empathic - showing empathy or ready comprehension of others' states; "a sensitive and empathetic school counselor"

- empathize - sympathize: be understanding of; "You don't need to explain--I understand!"

Source: Google [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&source=hp&q=define%3A+empathy&aq=f&oq=&aqi=g10](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&source=hp&q=define%3A+empathy&aq=f&oq=&aqi=g10)

Cognitively intimate teams hold a valid and shared mental model of the work and most importantly, a shared mental model of the cognitive styles and perception mechanics of all team members. Johanna Zweig’s work on group coherence speaks to this. The cognitively intimate state is probably a pre-condition for group coherence". Group coherence is defined as

“….the shared energetic state reached by a group of people that allows them to perform one or more tasks in perfect rhythm and harmony with great energy to overcome obstacles.”

Software team members must be intimate with the work and with each other’s cognitive styles to accomplish the stated task of developing working software in the hyper-productive state. Features in the Scrum framework such as the daily stand-up and the post-Sprint retrospective are actively encouraging this.

**Manipulative and Coercive Taking**

When collaboration is viewed in this way, it is clear that manipulative and coercive forms of social interaction associate with assault or rape in an abstract sense. Here, nothing is given and everything is taken. There is no willingness-- and no consent. There is a complete absence of intimacy in any form. This state has dotted lines to BART" analysis: good boundaries make for healthy relationships and set up a potential for real collaboration. Poorly defined and poorly managed boundaries leads to all sorts of dysfunction at the individual and group levels. Fuzzy, ill-defined boundaries invite manipulative and coercive forms of social interaction. Effective boundaries and good boundary management are therefore essential. Effective boundaries are boundaries that are clearly specified, agreed upon, and adhered to.
Creating an Environment Conducive to Intimacy

Sport teams coaches at the level of college Division 1 sports and professional sports have an intuitive sense of teamwork mechanics, intimacy, and collaboration. What are the specific exercises, and structures of organization that best facilitate intimacy and resulting collaboration and the potential for great results?

Clear and minimal set of ground rules

Absent clear ground rules, a group must create them. This is a complex social process that generates much waste during any definition-of-rules phase. Ground rules constrain and govern the range of likely behavior. Behavior in turn informs group culture— and norms. Teams can accelerate to genuine productivity faster when ground rules are clearly specified, agreed upon, and adhered to. On software development teams, the Scrum framework provides these ground rules including definitions for roles, tasks, authority and related boundaries.

Ground rules conducive to intimacy and collaboration and collaborative learning

Having a minimal set of ground rules which are clearly specified, agreed upon, and adhered to is important. But for managing to specific outcomes, such as winning games or creating a great work product, the ground rules must be optimized to accelerate group-level intimacy, collaboration and learning. Again the Scrum framework shines in this respect. Scrum’s ground rules are optimized to provide an environment for safety, a necessary ingredient for developing collaborative intimacy. Collaborative Intimacy is a state of being between two or more individuals that continuously displays the properties of shared trust, disclosure/openness, and respect.

Ground rules that provide structure for direct communication regarding agreement, and conflict resolution

People are complex— and perceive reality subjectively. As a result disagreements between people on a team is quite normal. Ex any clear ground rules for resolution, actors in a dispute can generate tremendous levels of wasted energy attempting to resolve the conflict. The energy waste is manifested at the individual and group levels. In an environment of collaborative intimacy, all actors in a dispute have a clearly defined process for dispute resolution. (Recall that bonobo apes have just such a process.) Absent any defined process, teams seeking the hyper-productive state must actively create a process for dispute resolution. Coaches and others who are trying to optimize teams for a specific productive outcome can do well to define and establish ground rules that encourage immediate and lasting dispute resolution.

Social exercises early in group life that foster group-level familiarity and intra-team awareness


Sports coaches are not scientists, yet successful coaches intuitively know what to do early in team life. The best coaches encourage and help the team engage in group-level social games early in team life. Executing on group-level games that increase group-level awareness are *intimacy accelerators*. Such accelerators increase the rate of increase in the potential for collaborative intimacy.

Teams are typically a mix of established team members and recent new members. Games that accelerate familiarity and closeness help new team members map the social terrain of the team, by providing context for learning the interrelationships that are already present in team composition. For existing team members, games that accelerate intimacy are useful for learning about new team members.

In youth sports, the best organizations encourage and provide tools for these social games that promote group-level intimacy effects early in team life. USA Hockey, the governing body of youth hockey in the USA, publishes tools for coaches to do exactly this.

**Summary**

Good collaboration is like good sex. Both involve safety, mutual consent, mutual willingness testing, mutual trust, openness and mutual respect. Collaborative intimacy is a requirement of, and can lead to, the hyper-productive state. Scrum encourages group-level *familiarity* and *closeness*—Scrum encourages a climate of team intimacy.

Coaches and teams can use clear ground rules to define the “container for work.”. Coaches and teams can also use social games that encourage familiarity by and between team members, early in team life. Doing so accelerates the potential for group-level intimacy. Teams in the intimate state exhibit cognitive intimacy—an ability to use individual and group-level *empathy* when sending and receiving communication about the work.

The optimal frequency, volume and quantity of these social games before and after the team begins working is a ripe area for more research.

Good collaboration is like good sex. For either to happen, those involved must work to generate intimacy in advance of any collaborative act.
The Five Dysfunctions of a Team:  
http://www.amazon.com/Five-Dysfunctions-Team-Leadership-Lencioni/dp/0787960756

Scrum Guide:  http://www.scrumalliance.org/resources

See Linda Rising video at:  http://www.infoq.com/interviews/linda-rising-agile-bonobos

Jeff Sutherland Scrum Log:  http://www.jeffsutherland.com/scrum/

The BART of Group and Organizational Analysis:  

http://www.groupcoherence.com/
