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05-499: Section A
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Observation of Side Interactions During Peer Group Meetings

Objective

The purpose of this project was to observe the side interaction of peers in a group meeting setting and note any possible causal factors for the nature and frequency of side conversations.

Setting

I observed two meetings between conducted by the CMU Undergraduate Consulting Club (UCC). The group meets weekly for updates and discussions about logistics. The 14~15 club members sat mostly around a rectangular table, with several members sitting on couches a few meters away from the central table. Most members had their laptops in front of them to view and edit the agenda on a Google Document and keep up with the points being discussed.

Method

The focus of my observations were to spot any correlations between the nature of side conversations and the nature of members' relationships with the rest of the group. I took tallies of both big-group and side conversations between members, noting whether or not those conversations were on topic of the group discussions. After both meetings had been observed, I conducted interviews with the president, vice president and three randomly selected members to gauge their perspectives on side conversations and their causes.

The interview questions were:

- When do you think members are most distracted during meetings?
- Do you feel that side conversations, including clarification questions, hold us back from being more productive during meetings?

If a member missed more than a third of the meeting (20 minutes), their involvement was not noted. I also did not note my own engagement; at no point in time did I engage with the UCC members with the role of an observer. The judgement between off-topic and on-topic side conversations was made based on whether they contributed to either the big group conversation (i.e. a side suggestion during a brainstorming session), or clarified the content for the members (i.e. a clarification question). This judgement was largely subjective and made very quickly on the spot.

Results & Analysis

The frequency of both on and off topic side conversations were much lower for the two underclassmen. This is most likely due to their unfamiliarity with the professional nature of these meetings and their lack of understanding of the other members. They also share less experiences

with the upperclassmen; if there were more underclassmen in the club, their engagement levels may have increased. Interestingly, upperclassmen engaged in side conversations at a fairly uniform rate, regardless of whether they were old or new members; I had hypothesized that new members would interact at a lower rate. The frequency of side conversations did not correlate with the members' friendships outside of UCC or any other conceivable variable. Overall, members were engaging with other members freely and comfortably, depending on where they were sitting.

Interviews revealed a possible explanation for the lack of correlation in the data: the agenda. All five interviewees admitted that members were more prone to distraction when the meeting content was not pertinent to them. However, the vice president and two members added that they believed the side conversations did not take away from productivity levels, since all members involved in a certain portion of the meeting were active whenever necessary. The other two interviewees believed that side conversations were unproductive because they diminished members' understanding of projects they were not directly involved in.

The agenda played an interesting role in the group discussion. By having an shared agenda to refer back to throughout the meeting, members had the ability to jump back into the conversation after having missed a portion. It also allowed them to track their progress through the meeting and know before the meeting whether or not there was content that was relevant to their role. However, because the agenda was viewed on either a laptop or a mobile device, it facilitated distraction. Furthermore, the agenda allowed members to assume the authority of excusing themselves from certain periods of the meeting by allowing members to actively track their lack of importance at a certain stage of the meeting. Therefore, while it facilitated main-group discussions, it was simultaneously encouraging distraction by giving the members an excuse to be inactive.

Reflection

Looking back, I was mistaken in not assuming that the agenda would impact interactions as much as it did. If I had known this, I could have collected more data on the members' interactions with their laptops and designed a more appropriate interview.

Another flaw in the data collection process was the subjectivity of my observations. Because I was collecting data from multiple sources during a set number of time in one sitting, there may have been some data missed and some wrongly noted.