

Habit of Mind: Thinking Interdependently

“Take care of each other. Share your energies with the group.

No one must feel alone, cut off, for that is when you do not make it.”

Willie Unsoeld, mountain climber

Humans are social beings. We congregate in groups, find it therapeutic to be listened to, draw energy from one another, and seek reciprocity. In groups we contribute our time and energy to tasks that we would quickly tire of when working alone. In fact, solitary confinement is one of the cruelest forms of punishment that can be inflicted on an individual. Increasingly the complexity of our modern lives demands that we work as part of a team. To be able to share ideas, listen to each other, build ideas collaboratively, and draw on each other’s individual strengths. Doing this allows a team to achieve more than the sum the individuals that form it.

Unfortunately team work is often considered as a simple division of labor. One person does their part and then passes the task on to someone else to do theirs. This is *acting* interdependently, not *thinking* interdependently. When we think interdependently, we achieve something that wouldn’t be possible without the rest of the team. It’s not a matter of $a + b$ (which would be simple division of labor) but the reality of $a \times b$ that is thinking interdependently. We learn from and extend upon each other’s ideas and thoughts. We think together, not just work together.

Collaborative humans realize that all of us together are more powerful, intellectually or physically, than any one individual. Probably the foremost disposition in our global society is the heightened ability to think in concert with others, to find ourselves increasingly more interdependent and sensitive to the needs of others. Problem solving has become so complex that no one person can go it alone. No one has access to all the data needed to make critical decisions; no one person can consider as many alternatives as several people.

Working in groups requires the ability to justify ideas and to test the feasibility of solution strategies on others. It also requires developing a willingness and an openness to accept feedback from a critical friend. Through this interaction, the group and the individual continue to grow. Listening, consensus seeking, giving up an idea to work with someone else’s, empathy, compassion, group leadership, knowing how to support group efforts, altruism—all are behaviors indicative of cooperative human beings.

Thinking Interdependently entails the following four characteristics:

1. **Positive Interdependence.**

This means that the group sinks or swims together, that they rely on each other. There should be *one group goal*, not multiple individual goals.

2. **Individual Accountability.**

Each person should be responsible for their part. Although the task must be a joint task, each person has a role and must be held accountable for completing their part.

3. **Equal Participation.**

No one can be left to do it all, and no one should be able to opt out. The roles within the group are fairly distributed according to skills and time.

4. **Simultaneous Interaction.**

To encourage effective group work everyone should be doing something at the same time. We don’t want to encourage the division of labor into a sequence of unrelated tasks. No one should be waiting for others to “do their part.”



Sources:

- “Describing the Habits of Mind,” *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind*, ed. Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108008/chapters/Describing-the-Habits-of-Mind.aspx>
- “Thinking Interdependently,” *Habits of Mind*, <http://www.habitsofmind.org/content/thinking-interdependently>