

CS Capstone: Policy and Process for managing non-performing team members

Executive Summary:

If you don't do your job in the real world, you get fired. Simple as that. In Capstone, we enforce this reality by allowing teams to "fire" non-performing team members as a last resort, after going through the formal disciplinary process outlined here. Fired team members receive an "F" for the course/project and are barred from further participation with the team. This should never ever happen...but, regrettably, it sometimes does come to this...



Background: Why do we need a disciplinary process? What behaviors warrant action?

Just as in the real world, Capstone Design projects are challenging, stressful, and require the full participation of all team members to complete successfully. If a team member doesn't pull his or her weight, the other team members have no choice at all but to pick up the slack in order to avoid a disastrous project failure. Clearly this is grossly unfair; someone who is doing less than a fair share should not get credit for the work (and the same grade) of others who are doing more than their fair share. In many cases, the slacking team member *can actually do more damage to team efficiency than if he or she were not there at all*, i.e., if the team simply had one less member. This is because team members rely on the promises and output of the slacker....and then have to scramble all the harder to make up for the failure to deliver the goods right before the deliverable is due. At some point, it just is better to cut the dead weight, redistribute responsibilities among remaining team members, and get on with it.

From the standpoint of our CS program's integrity, the Capstone experience is designed as a true "capstone", i.e., an opportunity to bring together and demonstrate all of the skills you have learned. If certain students are allowed to coattail on the efforts of their teammates, the integrity of the entire Capstone experience is compromised. Thus, strong measures must exist to ensure that no student that has not fully demonstrated his or her abilities as a competent, highly-skilled software engineer should be allowed to pass the course.

Of course, the personal workloads of individual team members will vary during the term, meaning that there may be the occasional crisis during which they are not able to contribute quite their full share to a deliverable. This is normal in any team, and is not harmful if it's handled with good communication and remains rare. In Capstone, these sorts of variations are handled naturally by the peer eval system: the team member conscientiously takes the hit by noting in the peer eval that s/he did less work on a particular deliverable, and the peer eval system handles redistribution of deliverable points to reflect effort invested.

If failures to perform, however, are continuous, unannounced, and begin to affect team dynamics and the quality of the team's performance significantly, then this constitutes a major problem

which must be dealt with swiftly and professionally. **Note the emphasis on professionalism** --- there is no room here for hyperbole, personal attacks, unfounded accusations, etc. It's strictly business; *the main goal is always to get the team back to optimal function.*

Disciplinary Process

Learning to deal effectively with performance problems and team dynamics is one of the most valuable lessons you could take from this course. The following process is based on tried and true practices in the real world. The ultimate goal is not to be punitive, nor is it to embarrass or harass. Ideally, the best possible outcome is that --- after the formal notification that performance is unsatisfactory in the first step of the process --- the targeted team member will quickly repair whatever shortcomings existed, and the team can happily go on to complete the project.

The disciplinary process consists of the following, increasingly serious steps:

Phase 1: Adding Structure. Managing team problems by increasing clarity of team communications and expectations

Presumably, if a team member's performance begins to slip, there will be increasing displeasure among remaining team members. It is incumbent on the team leader to monitor this dynamic, and detect it as early as possible. At that time, the team leader should carefully consider whether team standards, organization, or work protocol should be adjusted, i.e., if the problem stems more from poor team management than from a particular person. Some examples include:

- Intermediate tasks assigned to a team member don't get done. Is this a communication problem? Perhaps the member in question truly didn't realize that this task was expected of him/her.
Possible Solutions: Change team protocol by posting minutes of every team meeting on the project website, including explicit listing of what tasks are assigned to each team member and when they are due. Or just keep a wiki or other team workspace with a task list; again, it should show tasks, expected outcome, and expected due date for that outcome clearly, in black and white. This generally solves the "I didn't know I was supposed to do that" problem.
- Things are delivered, but quality is poor/incomplete. Again, the first solution is for the team leader should respond by writing this up in black and white: make sure that expected completeness/functionality of intermediate deliverables is clearly described. Maybe it's a skills problem; consider re-assigning the team member to a task more down their alley of expertise.
- Things are delivered at the very last minute, allowing no time for integration. Clearly this is a planning problem. The team leader should initiate a change in team protocol so that individual deliverables (e.g., parts of a joint document, code, etc.) are due several days before deliverable due date to client/mentor, to allow for integration and revision. Note that this adjustment applies to all members of the team, not just (punitively) to the one who was lagging a bit.

In sum, quite a number of team dynamics problems can be solved by a good team leader's ability to tweak team standards and working protocols --- without ever singling out any one

individual --- in order to avoid the problem scenario altogether. In general, my umbrella term for this level of intervention is the "add structure" approach, where the team manager works to avoid all ambiguity and looseness in the team standards and expectations.

Phase 2.1: Direct Measures. Invoking a professional, targeted disciplinary action to highlight and address continuing performance problems.

If a particular team member continues to perform poorly, then a formal disciplinary action is justified. This begins with a formal memo to the offending member from the rest of the team, with a copy CC'd to the team's mentor and the CS Faculty Capstone organizer. The memo must be formal, completely professional, and should focus very clearly and specifically on the performance failures in question. Here is an outline:

- Intro paragraph: Should state the overall problem (e.g. repeated failure to complete assigned tasks on time), then document what measures the team has already taken in good faith to resolve the problem (e.g. have reminded you repeatedly via email that things were due, have raised the problem in team meetings, etc.).
- Specifics: This is a bulleted list that lists very specifically each of the main cases of performance failure. Include dates, missed assignments, every infraction that you are basing this formal complaint on. Don't embellish, just lay out the facts.
- Call to Action: In this closing paragraph you state that the situation is severely affecting team performance and morale, and request a formal response from the targeted member, in which s/he addresses each of the points and explains why there will be no further problems.

To help you develop a professional memo with the necessary level of detail right off the bat, **there is a template/example of a formal disciplinary memo** posted along with the link to this document in the Info and Policies section of the team website.

Phase 2.2: Formal Response and Resolution. Offending team member provides explanation and commits to specific resolution.

Upon receiving the formal disciplinary memo, the targeted team member **has 24 hours to reply with a formal response memo**. Upon receiving the CC of the formal memo, the mentoring faculty member will generally follow-up by sending an email to the targeted member, containing the link to the disciplinary policy (this document), and stating unequivocally that this is a serious situation, and that failure to respond formally and promptly may result in further disciplinary action, including expulsion from the Capstone course with a grade of F. An outline for an acceptable response memo from targeted party follows:

- Intro: Should take an overall position on the accusation (e.g., "I categorically disagree that I have not delivered my fair share" or "I agree that I've had some failures lately...this is why: eg, broke up with partner, dog died, lots of work, etc.")

- Specific response: Each of the failures documented in the formal disciplinary memo must be explicitly responded to. Nothing fancy is required, e.g., "It is true that I did not deliver this as expected"...then possibly list some mitigating or further information. Each bulleted failure should have matching response bullet --- address each one.
- Course of Action: Here is where you tell your teammates what you are going to do to resolve this problem. Give **specific commitments or changes** that you will make to ensure that the problem is resolved and that this never ever happens again. Recognize that failure to keep any one of these commitments could result in immediate firing from the team....meaning expulsion from the course with an F. Make sure to CC your team mentor and the CS Faculty Capstone Organizer on your response.

To help you develop a professional, accurate, and appropriately detailed response memo right off the bat, **there is a template/example of a formal response memo posted** along with the link to this document in the Info and Policies section of the team website.

Phase 2.3: Faculty Review of Problem and Resolution.

The team mentor (in collaboration with the Capstone Organizer) reviews the response. If it is found to be lacking, he or she may ask the team member for a revision, e.g., "the changes in behavior you propose do not seem to address the problems pointed out, please revise and resubmit". If the response memo appears to address the problem areas, no further action is required.

If behaviors change and the problem is resolved, then the matter is forgotten. What this means is that other team members should act like complete professionals --- there is no room for leftover grudges here. If the performance comes up to snuff, then it's over and everyone is happy.

Phase 3: Firing (failing) of continued poor performers.

If behaviors do not change, i.e., if the disciplined team member fails to live up to one or more commitments made in the response memo, or otherwise fails to contribute again in an obvious or egregious fashion, then the remaining team members should schedule a meeting with the team mentor and CS Faculty Capstone Organizer. At this meeting, the performance failure will be reviewed, and an appropriate response will be crafted. The department chair may be invited to sit in on this meeting as well, to offer an opinion, and to sanction any disciplinary action that is decided on. If it is decided that no further chances for improvement should be given, then the faculty member or department chair formally notifies the disciplined team member that s/he has been fired and is dismissed from the course.

Obviously, dismissal from a course -- just as firing from a job ---- is a very serious matter. Thus, every step of the process must be fully and formally documented. Once disciplinary action is initiated, all parties should keep archival copies of all emails and memos pertinent to the matter, and should take notes on events as they occur.

It should go without saying that this is an internal team matter, and should be treated with confidentiality by all parties. Specifically, it is not appropriate for any team member to complain about or discuss disciplinary matters with persons outside the team. **Above all, your client/sponsor should always be shielded from internal team difficulties!**