Building Effective Projects Teams and Teamwork

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Abstract

To build effective project teams and to maintain the necessary teamwork, a project leader must understand the aspects of team leadership and the crucial skills of team members. In this paper, we review and analyse the two aspects of team leadership: (1) developing credibility and influence among team members and (2) establishing a motivating vision and goals for the team – because an exemplary project leader must understand these aspects before they can master them. We also look in-depth at the two main skills associated with team membership: (1) advantageous roles and (2) providing helpful feedback to others. We believe that it is important for project leaders to properly balance their leadership style to enhance team performance. “The key is to have a balance between task-oriented roles and relationship-building roles displayed in the team [to help avoid] the downfall of many teams … [who become] one dimensional” (Whetten & Cameron, 2016, p.515). Lastly, we reviewed the four stages of team development and how a team can reach the performing stage. We feel that a project leader can enable the team to reach the performing stage only when they can identify what stage the team currently is in. This will allow the project leader to properly establish clear, and concise goals and to reward team members when successful. We believe this knowledge prevents a project leader from becoming complacent and ignorant to the team’s success. Effective teams can quickly fall behind when groupthink takes over or when the team is not focused on the correct tasks.

Keywords: Teamwork, Project Leader, Leadership, Motivation, Performance

Introduction

Building effective teams and teamwork is not limited to a specific organization; this is an approach that can be used anywhere that collaboration is required among multiple people, teams or projects. Every team needs to be able to work together towards a common goal in order to be successful. When faced with adversity, the tactics mentioned in this paper can help teams become prepared to handle it. Deep down everyone wants to contribute to the success of their organization and team. The scope of our analysis includes, but is not limited to identifying the key elements of the two aspects of team leadership; the two main skills associated with team membership; and the four stages of team development as they pertain to building effective project teams and teamwork.

Background

We chose our theme to be building effective teams and teamwork because it is the essence of proper project leadership. Project leadership and teamwork are forever intertwined as
they depend on each other to be successful. Leaders are unable to lead a team if they cannot inspire the team to work together. Also, it is difficult to maintain effective teamwork without the guidance of a strong leader.

As the lifeblood of project management, project leadership has a long history. It has been developed over years of research and work experience, but it still remains both fluid and dynamic. While researchers have begun to classify different types of leadership styles, and when to and not to utilize them, the right style will always depend on the person. Their specific traits and the environment they work in will dictate which best practices to use. “It is not the style of the leader that makes a difference. Multiple leadership styles can be effective, and no one style has particular advantages over others. Rather, it is the skills and capabilities of the leader, or the tools and techniques put into practice that account for effective versus ineffective team performance” (Whetten & Cameron, 2016, p.506).

**Literature Review**

Working on project leadership and teamwork can present many challenges that leaders and followers must consider if they want to have an effective team. This paper will reference scholarly materials that teach team members how to avoid or work through these challenges so that they can be as effective as possible. Developing Management Skills by Whetten & Cameron (2016) will provide the foundation for our paper, Building Effective Teams. Leadership by Hughes, Ginnett & Curphy (2012) will provide an example of the Team Leadership Model and how it can aid with team membership. A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (2013) provides an overall picture of project management. This paper also references online journals, articles, textbooks, and class lecture notes; all of which will add depth to this paper.

Due to ever-growing economic, political, and technological forces, more and more business organizations are finding it difficult to effectively compete in today’s aggressive markets. They are often forced to work smarter, more strategically, and with better efficiency just to survive. (Martinelli, Rahschulte, & Waddell, 2010) “Most senior leaders have realized the need to become a part of the global marketplace, and in many cases have developed strategies to move their organizations into the global arena. For some, the strategies have been well executed. For most, however, senior leaders and their staff are realizing that good strategy is not good enough. Changes in globalization strategy have to be accompanied by changes in global execution. Within an organization, focus must quickly shift from the development and initiation of their globalization strategies to operational success in developing their products and services in a global model” (Martinelli et al., 2010, p.30). Accomplishing “more” with “less” seems to be the growing strategy of many who are quickly turning to the benefits of project management to effectively plan, organize, lead, and execute such survival tactics. “With project management, organizations have the ability to apply knowledge, processes, skills, tools and techniques that enhance the likelihood of success over a wide range of projects. Project management focuses on the successful delivery of products, services, or results. Within programs and portfolios, projects are a means of achieving organizational strategy and objectives” (PMI, 2013, p.16). Thus,
building effective project teams and teamwork becomes tactically necessary to assure organizational goals and success.

Effective project teams are powerful as they can offer an organization more opportunities by finding unique, creative, and efficient ways to solve strategic business problems. For instance, senior management may agree to initiate a new product development project for implementation to increase market share. Acquiring the necessary top talent to realize such project goals often involves bringing a diverse group of people together to brainstorm, collaborate, and solve tactical problems. Leveraging the diverse talents, background experiences, and interests of members often leads to more creative solutions during team problem solving efforts. The better a team performs such problem solving activities often determines how fast they can implement and introduce their new product solutions to market for improved profitability (Martinelli et al., 2010). Thus, assuring project teams with proper keys for success becomes an integral part of the organizational strategic business plan. Team performance often depends upon the following key factors for success:

- Proposed projects need to be evaluated, prioritized, and properly aligned with the strategic business goals of the organization and gain the necessary agreement and support from senior management (Martinelli et al., 2010).

- Team performance is measured against the triple constraints of a clearly defined and agreed upon project scope, budget, and schedule (PMI, 2013).

- Fostering a team environment where members can openly communicate with mutual respect builds more trustworthy working relationships for a culture of collaboration, teamwork, and productivity (Whetten & Cameron, 2016).

- Learning the diverse talents, background experiences, and preferences of team members fosters better opportunities to properly align more meaningful and worthwhile work assignments for an improved sense of job satisfaction (Martinelli et al., 2010).

- Transferring appropriate decision-making authority to team members often leads to better-informed point-of-impact decisions and efficiency (Martinelli et al., 2010).

- Fostering open lines of supportive communication among team members and upper management assures stakeholders are kept informed to minimize the risks of any “surprises” along the way should any key upper management decisions need to be made in the event of an emergency (Martinelli et al., 2010).

- Teams must evolve through four stages of development before they can become effective. The *Forming* stage brings a diverse group of people together to interact as a unique entity with interdependencies. The *Storming* stage includes conflict as members define roles and expectations. The *Norming* stage begins by resolving prior Storming conflicts through understanding of expectations. Finally, the *Performing* stage is where collaboration, teamwork, and productivity build towards assuring the triple constraints of the project effort (Whetten & Cameron, 2016).
In addition, developing high-performance project teams includes: (1) focusing on winning, (2) setting high expectations by applying a high degree of accountability, (3) accepting no excuses, (4) being resilient, and (5) adopting a “can-do” attitude with an optimistic approach (Haughey, 2015). However, project teams often struggle during their Storming stage of development. “As the name suggests, this stage is marked by a high degree of internal conflict. Members accept that they are part of a project group but resist the constraints the project and group put on their individuality. There is conflict over who will control the group and how decisions will be made. As these are resolved, the project manager’s leadership becomes accepted, and the group moves to the next stage” (Gray & Larsen, 2006, pages 344 - 345). Still, effectively managing such conflict can be challenging and should involve a thoughtful and systematic approach towards finding common ground to better understand the root cause of perhaps a deeper issue while looking for a win-win resolution.

Dr. James Brown (2010), author of The Three P’s for Successful Conflict Management, argues most conflicts can be resolved through prevention, passiveness, and persistence while simultaneously increasing the strength of your project team. For instance, allowing some time for tensions to cool down often affords opportunities to remain engaged in the conversation long enough to better understand the root cause of such tensions and to possibly find a win-win resolution. Finally, project managers can leverage the Team Development Model to help guide their teams through the various stages of development. “Project managers have found it useful to share the Team Development Model with their project teams. It helps members accept the tension of the storming phase, and it directs their focus to moving toward the more productive phases. The final implication is that it stresses the importance of the norming phase, which contributes significantly to the level of productivity experienced during the performing phase” (Gray et al., 2006, p.345).

When building effective teams, there needs to be a strong leader to help direct the team through a project life cycle. While the leadership role may be shared by multiple team members, the presence of a strong leader is consistent throughout all effective teams. The two aspects of team leadership are (1) developing credibility and influence among team members, and (2) establishing a vision and goals for the team.

While developing and maintaining credibility is not only expected from a team leader, it is a requirement if the leader wants to influence the team members. By being clear and consistent, a team member can demonstrate the integrity an employee would expect of the leader. “Expressing certainty about what you want and where you are going … helps produce confidence on the part of others” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508). A leader’s conviction in the vision and goals set forth for the team will provide the confidence to the other team members to remain on track even through difficult times. “Articulating and reinforcing an unwavering and persistent point of view is much more effective than changing opinions or preferences depending on whether or not others agree with you” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508). Creating a positive energy will help team members build off the confidence that the leader has built. “When you are seen as a source of positive energy and enthusiasm, you have more credibility and influence among team members” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508).
A newer concept of team leadership is the sharing of information. In the past, information was not as readily shared with employees and subordinates. People were given information on a need to know basis. This often left team members confused about the direction of the project and perpetuated misunderstandings. It is difficult for a team member to be fully committed when they have not been given all the information needed to understand the problem and solution. By sharing information with the entire team, it will increase the likely hood that everyone buys into the vision. “Credibility is built by having knowledge about the tasks and the external environment facing the team” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508). It will also increase critical thinking and reduce groupthink because the number of team members attempting to determine the best course of action is increased. “No leader can be an expert on all topics relevant to the team, but effective leaders continually increase and expand their storehouse of knowledge about the team and its environment” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508).

Developing and maintaining credibility is only half the battle. While it is easier to establish a motivating vision and goal when you are a credible and influential leader, the vision must be consistent with the organization’s message. “Leaders who clearly articulate the desired outcomes for and with the team are more likely to experience high performance from the team” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508). There are two types of goals that characterize high-performing teams: (1) SMART goals, and (2) Everest goals.

It is very common for an effective team to become complacent when they have experienced a lot of success, especially early in the project when goals have been met quicker and easier than expected and the project is ahead of schedule. When building an effective team, a great leader will establish goals that help the team maintain the momentum they have built. “People tend to work toward the standard that has been established, and when it is easy, they slack off. Establishing general goals result in improved performance over easy goals, but identifying difficult goals produces far higher levels of performance” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508). These SMART goals prevent an effective team from becoming stagnated and falling behind. Falling behind can happen quickly, and it can be difficult to reverse the negative momentum, so it is important that SMART goals become a part of the team culture. SMART goals are only effective when used as a proactive source of motivation rather than a reactive one.

Effective teams are dissatisfied with maintaining the status quo. Great leaders realize that the greatest accomplishment is becoming better than you were the day before. There is always room for improvement irrespective of other teams or organizations. It is built into the culture and mind-set of the team that there will always be a continual push to better yourself and the team. Everest “goals are often connected to: (1) producing human benefit for others, (2) a core personal value, (3) producing an impact that extends beyond the immediate, even over a lifetime, (4) virtues such as love, faith, integrity, compassion, hope, or (5) producing a ripple effect, so that the achievement is reproduced over and over again” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.508). Everest goals are not something that a team member can perform on their own. They are the foundation for all teamwork of an effective team.

Ginnett’s Team Leadership Model or TLM (2012) is, “specifically designed to help teams perform more effectively.” (p.410). The TLM has three levels: (1) Output level; (2) Process level; and (3) Input level. The process level is where the leader will want to focus in order to help build
team membership. Why does the leader want to focus on the process level as it pertains to team
membership? “Actually, there are several reasons why a leader might want to pay attention to the
team’s process – how the team goes about its work.” (Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy, 2012, p.413). The
process level can provide information that will help coordinate the team’s roles by using the
four process measures. “The four process measures of effectiveness provide criteria by which we
can examine how teams work. If a team is to perform effectively, it must (1) work hard enough,
(2) have sufficient knowledge and skills within the team to perform the task, (3) have an
appropriate strategy to accomplish its work, and (4) have constructive and positive group dynamics
among its members, including such aspects as how they communicate with others, express feelings
toward each other, and deal with conflict with each other, to name but a few characteristics.”
(Hughes et al., 2012, p.414). Using the process measures will help the leader fill the roles he has
available on his team with effective personnel. The measures can also help increase feedback
through open communication with one another on the team.

Team membership is an important function that leaders of effective teams must be aware
of to be successful. According to Whetten and Cameron (2016) there are, “two main skills
associated with team membership – playing advantageous roles, and providing helpful feedback
to others.” (p.422). All team members must have and know their role in order for the team to
perform at its highest level. Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy (2012) says, “Effective teams had a clear
mission and high performance standards. Everyone on the team knew what the team was trying
to achieve and how well he or she had to perform in order to achieve the team’s mission.” (p.408).
Bill Gates is an extremely accomplished individual; but if it was not for his team and everyone
knowing the role they played on the team, then Microsoft may have never become the company it
is today. Members of our team have been effective with this major project because we chose our
roles early on in the project and knew what tasks we had to complete.

It is up to the team leaders to place team members into the positions that best suit their
skills so that they can succeed. “Leaders of successful teams often took stock of their equipment,
training facilities and opportunities, and outside resources available to help the team.” (Hughes et
al., 2012, p.408). When we observe high performing teams, whether in sports or business,
everyone is contributing to the team success through their role. Many of the team members are
put into their role by a coach or manager based on their talent or skill.

Team members can play many different facilitating roles within their teams. These roles
include: “Direction Giving; Information Giving; Information Seeking; Elaborating; Urging;
Monitoring; Process Analysing; Reality Testing; Enforcing; and Summarizing” (Whetten &
Cameron, 2016, p.423). A manager may be the person who gives direction to the team; while a
junior team member may be the person who is responsible for monitoring a specific portion of the
project. They both know their roles and accomplish their task so that the team will succeed.

Providing feedback to others is the second skill associated with team membership (Whetten
et al., 2016). Feedback can come from various individuals in a person’s environment. They can
receive it from a boss at work; a pastor at church; a spouse at home; a professor at school; or
someone else. Whetten and Cameron (2016) suggest the following principles should be used when
giving effective feedback: “Focus feedback on behaviour rather than personal attributes; Focus
feedback on observations rather than inferences and on descriptions rather than judgments; Focus
feedback on behaviour related to a specific situations, preferably to the “here and now,” rather than on abstract or past behaviour; Focus feedback on sharing ideas and information rather than giving advice; Focus feedback on the amount of information that the recipient can use, rather than on the amount you might like to give; Focus feedback on the value it may have to the receiver, not on the emotional release it provides for you; Focus feedback on time and place so that personal data can be shared at appropriate times” (pgs.426-427).

How often does an individual usually give or receive feedback in their personal life or professional career? Professionally, once or twice a year if they have semi-annual reviews. Personally, we may receive feedback on a daily basis, but it probably does not delve too deep. That is why it is important to ask for feedback from those around us on a regular basis. Bolman and Gallos (2011) says, “Skilled and confident academic leaders make it a point to regularly seek feedback from peers, subordinates, bosses, and other key stakeholders” (p.43). People should not wait to receive feedback from others; they should seek it out. We should ask questions to help direct an individual’s feedback so that it will be deeper and more meaningful. Knowing what others think about us and our work will help grow our personal and professional well-being. During this major project group one team members provided constant feedback about each individual’s contributions. The feedback was timely and professional so team members could process each other’s suggestions and not offend one another.

Lessons Learned

Projects are a necessary means towards senior management achieving ethical business goals for a more competitive advantage within the markets they choose to compete in. Senior management must therefore support project management efforts by assuring prioritized project initiatives are properly aligned with strategic business goals and that project leaders are empowered with appropriate decision making authority to effectively execute such project plans. Acquiring the top talent necessary to achieve such strategic business goals brings a diverse group of people together for brainstorming, collaboration, and decision making for more creative solutions to team problem solving efforts. Such project teams must naturally progress through four stages of development before becoming productive. However, some teams struggle with conflict during their Storming stage of development. Managing such conflict often entails a thoughtful and systematic approach towards preventing unproductive tensions long enough to passively remain engaged in the conversation to learn more about deeper root-cause issues and to find common ground for a possible win-win resolution. Finally, project managers can leverage the Team Development Model to help guide their teams through their various stages of development towards productivity during the Performing stage.

An effective team is built on the influence of a strong, credible leader or group of leaders. However, being in a position of power does not automatically provide you with the influence over the team that is required to enact change. A lesson that we learned is that there are three R’s that can be utilized when transforming power into influence: (1) retribution, (2) reciprocity, and (3) reason (Whetten et al., 2016). When used in the correct way, all three can be effective tools to establish and maintain influence. However, the misuse of these will destroy the credibility a strong leader needs and prevent that leader from establishing a motivating vision and goal.
Retribution is a personal threat based on formal authority. “Retribution strategies ignore the rights of others and the norm of fairness … and leads to ignoring the quality of the ongoing relationship between the parties” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.243). It is a poor way to manage when used as the foundation, but it can be an effective tool when used at the correct times. It “produces immediate action and work that conforms to the manager’s specifications … Effective manager’s use this approach sparingly, generally reserving it for crises or as a last resort when the other strategies have failed” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.244) However, managers tend to use this method too often because they feel threatened. “When used frequently, [it] produces resentment and alienation, which frequently generates overt or covert opposition … [and] stifles initiative and innovative behaviour” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.244). It would derail any effective team and would prevent a team from ever getting past the norming stage.

Reciprocity satisfies the self-interest of both parties and quite different from retribution. “Reciprocity recognizes the value of strengthening interdependence between the people” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.244). While it can and should be used more frequently than retribution, it must be understood and appropriately used. The disadvantage is that “it engenders a highly instrumental view of work … [and it] might undercut employees’ commitment levels” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.244). In addition, it prevents effective teams from meeting their SMART and Everest goals. “Ingratiation has some negative effects; recipients of ingratiation tend to exhibit overconfidence and an unwillingness to make needed changes.” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.243).

Leveraging strong reasoning skills is another effective approach towards transforming a position of power into influence. “Use the inherent merits of the request to convince the influence target to choose compliance themselves … the focus is on helping others to see why your ideas make sense” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.243). Reasoning is appealing because the decision is based on the facts of the situation rather than any people-oriented factors. “Commitment relies on teaching correct principles and explaining legitimate needs and then trusting the good intent and sound judgement of subordinates to act appropriately” (Whetten et al., 2016, p.244). But as with the other styles, there is a negative aspect that must understood to prevent any unintended consequences. “A persuasive appeal is explicit and direct, while a manipulative act is implicit and deceptive. The persuader respects the autonomy of decision makers and trust their ability to judge evidence effectively. In contrast, a manipulator has low regard for the abilities of decision makers and doesn’t trust them to make good decisions.” (DMS 244). A strong leader should understand the positive and negatives of all three styles and utilize them based on the situation. When building an effective team and establishing strong teamwork, a leader will be able to use this flexibility to help push the team into the next level.

An effective team will utilize team membership to help designate team roles, and to help provide constructive feedback to one another. We learned that some roles will overlap amongst team members in order to fill voids when we do not have the appropriate resources at a given time. The TLM helped us with our communication, which led to more open feedback amongst team members. We learned that feedback is needed to help teams be more effective in their work. Feedback is to be pursued by the individual from their peers, and individuals should give feedback to others when the opportunity presents itself. Positive feedback is okay to be given publically, but negative feedback should always be done in private. Having goals and a vision helped individuals succeed in their roles because they knew exactly what was expected of them and what
the outcome would be once they completed their task. Trying to give feedback on the individual’s present accomplishments, and not their past transgressions proved to be difficult; especially for really hard to work with team members. By staying focused on their most current achievements, the feedback was much easier to deliver; and most of the time pleasantly received. Utilizing Whetten and Cameron’s (2016) principles to giving effective feedback proved to encourage leaders and followers have an open and constructive dialogue with one another on how they were performing within the team. This feedback increased team productivity, cleared misconceptions, and lead to the team to moving forward as a more cohesive unit.

Conclusion

Projective business organizations build effective project teams and teamwork to execute strategic initiatives for market share and profitability. Team performance often depends upon several key factors for success including: an organizational project portfolio management process; acquiring the necessary top talent for effective project execution; project management acumen; fostering an environment of team membership, collaboration and teamwork; empowered leadership; and an ability to manage conflict. We recommend projective organizations provide their staff with appropriate leadership and project management training to develop necessary acumen for smoother running projects and better project outcomes. Finally, fostering a team environment based upon trust, mutual respect, and integrity often leads to more effective collaboration, creativity, teamwork, productivity, and profitability.

References


**APPENDIX**

TLM Process Variables

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**FIGURE 10.4**

TLM Process Variables: Diagnose the Team Using the Process Variables

Output

HPT

Individual characteristics

Team factors

Organizational systems

Input

P-1 Effort

P-2 Skills and knowledge

P-3 Strategy

P-4 Group dynamics

Source: Hughes et al., 2012, p.414.
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