
PROJECT TEAMS DO NOT JUST HAPPEN – THEY ARE BUILT

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This paper will focus on the development and establishment of an effective project team by identifying and clarifying specific problems when building a project team. The discussion starts off with a comparison between groups and teams. The characteristics of a project team are discussed to enable the reader to identify a project team. Specific criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of a project team are identified. When team members fail to understand each other, the project goals are not achieved. The project manager needs to ensure team participation in the formulation of project goals and he/she needs to motivate the team members to strive towards achieving the project goals. Conflict amongst the team members should be resolved swiftly to ensure that team members stay focused on the task at hand.

Key phrases: characteristics of project teams; team building; team leadership; team participation; team responsibility; team problems

INTRODUCTION

A significant shift is taking place in organisations around the world. No longer is the focus on the individual, but on the group or team. The importance of project teams for achieving organisational goals is growing by the day. It is for this reason that businesses and managers need to understand the value of an effective project team.

It is of the utmost importance that a project team is built on a proper foundation. Team members need to understand each other even if the team consists of individuals with different cultures and diverse backgrounds. It is the project manager's responsibility to ensure team participation in the formulation of project goals as well as motivating team members to achieve these goals.

Although conflict cannot always be avoided, it should be resolved without disrupting the timely completion of the project and without making team members feel less worthy of being part of the team.

THE DEFINITION OF A TEAM

"Behind an able man there are always other able men."
Chinese proverb

Through the ages people have formed groups. According to Maddux (1996:10) groups provide the basis for family living, protection, waging war, government, recreation and work, but groups achieve the greatest success when they "become more productive units, called teams". Thus a team is different from a group.

Therefore certain characteristics could be formulated to serve as guidelines for distinguishing between a group and a team.

Both Huszczo (1996:8) and Lewis (1998:67) define a team as “two or more people or a group of people who work together to achieve a *common goal or objective or purpose* and who produce high-quality results”. The CBA network (CBA 2004: Internet), describes a team as “a small number of people with *complementary skills* committed to a *common purpose, specific performance goals, a common working approach, and mutual accountability*”.

Redman (1996:13) identifies five characteristics by which to identify project teams:

- the sharing of a common interest
- having a common aim and set of values
- having common objectives and/or tasks
- members have designated tasks and/or roles
- the feeling of membership and loyalty to the group

Lewis (1998:67) expands on this by identifying attributes of a successful project team. These include open, honest communication; a willingness amongst members to listen to each other, even when opposing views are expressed; shared leadership; enthusiasm for the team; a strong sense of purpose, focused on achieving the team's goals; and a sense of interdependence. Focusing on these characteristics, it is possible to draw a comparison between groups and teams. Table 1 illustrates some of the major differences between groups and teams.

Table 1 Comparison of groups and teams

GROUPS	TEAMS
Members are grouped together for administrative purposes only. Individuals work independently.	Members recognise their interdependence and understand that both personal and team goals are best accomplished with mutual support.
Members tend to focus on themselves, because they are not involved in planning the unit's objectives.	Members are committed to the team's goals that they helped establish.
Members are told what to do rather than being asked what the best approach would be. Suggestions are not encouraged.	Members contribute to the team's and the organisation's success by applying their unique talent and knowledge to team objectives.

Members distrust the motives of colleagues because they do not understand the role of other members.	Members work in a climate of trust. They are encouraged to express their ideas, opinions, disagreements and feelings openly. Questions are welcomed. Members understand the roles of the other members in the team.
Members are cautious about what they say. This hinders understanding. Game playing may occur.	Members practice open and honest communication. They make an effort to understand each other's point of view.
Members may receive good training, but are limited in applying it to the job by the supervisor or other members of the group.	Members are encouraged to develop skills and apply what they learn to the job. They receive support from the team.
Members find themselves in conflict situations which they do not know how to resolve.	Members recognise conflict as an opportunity for new ideas and creativity. They work to resolve conflict quickly and constructively.
Members may sometimes not participate in decisions affecting the group.	Members participate in decisions affecting the team.

Source: Adapted from Maddux 1996:10

From the above table it is clear that teams are more interdependent than groups as the members of a team are not only committed to achieving their own personal goals but also the team's goals. In most groups there seems to be an atmosphere of distrust and members struggle to resolve conflict due to misunderstandings and miscommunication. Teams exhibit an atmosphere of trust and understanding. Team members are not afraid to express their views and are motivated to come up with creative and innovative ideas.

From an organisational point of view, project teams have a powerful effect on productivity. Huszczo (1996:8) identifies some of the *potential benefits of project teams* for the organisation:

- Project teams provide an important source of stimulation.
- Project teams are capable of coming up with better solutions for problems than individuals working alone.

- Project teams provide a structure that encourages involvement, especially in large organisations.
- Project teams can even serve as a vehicle for organisational development.
- People working in project teams feel as if they belong somewhere, thus workers are more satisfied.
- Project teams provide a forum for constructive conflict resolution.
- In a project team, individuals have the opportunity to develop leadership skills.
- Having employees work in project teams, improves their productivity, because it focuses on a more flexible approach to utilising the knowledge and skills of the employees.
- In a project team environment, employees realise that everyone needs to depend on each other for the organisation to succeed.

From this it is clear that there are many benefits to forming project teams in a business environment. If working in project teams could improve employees' productivity and creativity, it is worth considering. The problem however, is assembling the *ideal* project team. Managers face the challenge of assembling the *right* project team for each project. There are certain important aspects to consider when recruiting members for a project team.

RECRUITING A PROJECT TEAM

In order to complete a project successfully and achieve project goals, it is important to have an effective project team capable of achieving these goals. A successful team begins with the right people.

Thomas (2000:4) mentions five points to consider when selecting members for a project team:

- **Qualifications**

The areas of *technical expertise* needed to complete the project, must be defined. Determine whether the organisation's internal staff possess the knowledge and skills required for the project or if outside specialists are needed. Do research to find out if the potential members for the project team have worked on a similar project before.

- **Availability**

A potential team *member's* workload must be considered to ensure his/her *availability* before bringing him/her on board.

- **Interest level**

It is important to find *people who want* to be part of the project. If team members are disinterested, they perform below their capabilities. This could sabotage the project's success.

- **Chemistry**

Potential team *members* need to be able to *work together harmoniously*. Conflict and disagreement can be detrimental to the project's success.

- **Balance**

It is important for *team* members to have different skills and different approaches to problem-solving and technical innovations. If all the members have the same ideas, there is less creativity and important factors may be overlooked.

Thus the ideal team member must have the necessary *knowledge and skills* required for the project, he/she must be *available* to work on the project and he/she must *want* to work on the project. The team members that are selected for the project must be able to *work together* effectively and must be able to *appreciate each other's differences*. It is important that the team consists of diverse members with various skills and talents, because each member will contribute in his/her own unique way to the success of the project.

The importance of having a diverse team with different skills and areas of expertise is illustrated in example 2.

Example 2 The importance of having a diverse team

Mission Impossible

There is an interesting contrast between the quest to put a man on the moon and the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster. When NASA approached the original and mind-boggling job of solving the scientific problems of putting someone on the moon they used a team approach. But they did not use ordinary teams. Instead they set a series of puzzles – for instance, how to prevent the capsule from burning up on re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. For each puzzle they then put together a mixed team including scientists, designers, poets, businesspeople etc. Each team had a mixture of expertise and skills – some of it very lateral indeed. However, the approach did work.

The report into the *Challenger* highlighted one of the main factors in the disaster as the narrowness and organisational cloning within the project teams. The fault that caused the failure was actually very small – a faulty rivet no less. However, because everyone had a similar engineering and scientific background they all missed the fatal fault. The inclusion of the odd poet on the project team may have averted the disaster.

Source: Adapted from Morris, Willcocks & Knasel (2000:106)

One could speculate that if the project team working on the Space Shuttle, *Challenger* were more diverse, the faulty rivet might have been picked up and the disaster might have been prevented. Due to the “organisational cloning” that took place in the assembly of the project team, all the members had the same skills and knowledge. They all followed the same thinking patterns and they all overlooked the smaller details that lead to them missing the faulty rivet. Sometimes it helps to look at something from a different angle. The odd poet on the project team might not have had the technical expertise to build the shuttle, but his thinking pattern would have been different which means that he would have focused on some of the other aspects of the project.

This emphasises the importance of team members appreciating their other team members’ ideas, however different or strange they might be from their own. Teams are diverse for a reason. Team members’ skills and knowledge are supposed to complement each other.

If an ideal project team consists of diverse members with different skills and knowledge, certain specific *roles* that need to be fulfilled could be identified. Morris, Willcocks & Knasel (2000:107) identified seven different roles that need to be covered by the members of a project team.

- **The challenger**
To prevent the “groupthink” phenomenon from taking place every team needs someone who will bring the team down to earth with blunt comments and awkward questions.
- **The ideas person**
A team needs someone who comes up with creative ideas. They provide insight into other possibilities.
- **The driving force**
The driving force is the person who keeps the team focused and on track. He/she reminds the team of its constraints and of what it needs to focus on to achieve the project goals.
- **The bottom-liner**
This individual may not say much, but he/she acts as the team’s accountant who keeps a watch on reality. The bottom-liner watches the bottom-line and stays clear and focused.

- **The implementer**
Ideas persons tend not to be good implementers, because they grow bored once the idea has been generated. But where would any good idea be without someone to put it all together and make it work? This is where the implementer comes in.
- **The calming influence**
This person is usually a social animal capable of helping people get along. He/she acts as the mediator during clashes between team members. He/she balances the directness of the challenger and keeps the ideas person's feet on the ground.
- **The captain**
The team leader is the captain. The captain facilitates everyone else in their roles to ensure team effectiveness. It is the captain's responsibility to motivate team members and create an atmosphere of participation.

Although project team members are expected to have different skills, certain types of skills could be classified as synonymous with being a good team member. These skills should be possessed by all project team members. According to Lewis (1998:74), skills that are essential to being a good project team member, are listening, resolving conflict, problem solving, decision making, assertiveness and openness.

LaFasto & Larson (2001:2) are of the opinion that a team's effectiveness depends on "the qualities of the individuals who make up the team". Sometimes it is difficult to determine what specific *qualities* and *behaviours* a person should possess to be an effective team member. After conducting interviews with teams across a wide range of organisations, LaFasto & Larson (2001:1) came to the conclusion that a team member should have a "core competency". A *core competency* involves two aspects: having sufficient experience to do the job assigned to him/her and having problem-solving skills to overcome any problems he/she might face on the path to achieving the team's goals. But knowledge and skill is not enough. Certain *personal qualities* are essential for success: openness, supportiveness and a positive attitude.

According to the GSN network (GSN 2003:Internet), the characteristics of an effective project team member are:

- A willingness to contribute ideas and to participate in problem-solving

- The willingness to value the ideas of others
- The willingness to be a team player
- A willingness to rely on and trust in other team members
- A willingness to follow through on tasks

A project's success depends on everyone doing their part. Team members should be able to rely on each other. Each team member should take responsibility for his/her part in the project.

To ensure project success, the project team needs to function effectively. It is possible to identify certain characteristics which could be associated with an effective project team.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE PROJECT TEAM

Project teams do not just happen. They are built. After assembling the project team, steps need to be taken to develop an effective project team capable of achieving the project goals. Certain characteristics constitute an effective project team.

Lewis (1993:22) is of the opinion that to understand what project teams should be like, one has to look at what causes an ineffective project team first and only after identifying the factors that characterise ineffective project teams is it possible to formulate the factors that characterise an effective project team. He identifies the following factors that characterise an ineffective team:

- A dominant leader causes a phenomenon called “groupthink” where fear of disagreeing with the team leader hinders team effectiveness.
- Warring cliques or subgroups prevent team members from working together. A team cannot function if the members are fighting among each other.
- Unequal participation in team activities and problem-solving.
- Rigid and dysfunctional norms and procedures. Inflexible rules, norms and procedures hinder team effectiveness.
- A climate of defensiveness or fear leads to team members hesitating to express their views. Unrealistic deadlines and the threat of severe penalties for failure to meet those deadlines leads to lower quality in the results delivered.
- Uncreative alternatives to problems arise when team members are afraid to take risks or when one person dominates the problem-solving process or when team members do not brainstorm properly.

- Restricted communication because all information needs to go through the team leader. Such communication is slow and prevents messages from reaching the intended people.
- Avoidance of differences leads to personality conflicts. Team members, who do not know how to confront differences in a positive way, end up fighting unnecessarily. This hinders the successful completion of the project because time needs to be taken out to resolve the conflict.

The CBA network (CBA 2004:Internet) also identified some characteristics of ineffective project teams:

- there is a high level of negativity and passivity
- problems are not solved properly due to lack of clarity about what the problem is
- members do not work together, but against each other. This leads to a lot of win-lose situations among members
- power plays and dominance by one or two members, hinders team effectiveness.

It is obvious from the above that lack of communication, trust and support can render a team ineffective. For a team to function properly, the members need to be able to understand each other and they should not be afraid to express their own views. It is now possible to determine the factors that characterise an effective team.

Morris, Willcocks & Knasel (2000:102) discuss six characteristics of winning project teams:

- A team needs to know where it is going; therefore it is important that team members participate in the formulation of project goals.
- Team members need to be able to speak their minds freely and say when they disagree with something.
- Different members should bring different skills to the team.
- Mutual trust and support is important for creating a sense of belonging amongst team members.
- All members should understand the procedures for decision-making, problem-solving etc.
- Time should be put aside to determine the team's progress.

Huszczko (1996:16), on the other hand, believes team effectiveness can be measured by focusing on seven key dimensions:

- A clear sense of direction – team members should understand the project goals and objectives.
- Qualified team members – team members should possess the necessary knowledge and skills required for the project.
- Clear responsibilities – each team member should know exactly what is expected of him/her.
- Reasonable operating procedures – team members must understand the steps involved in completing the project.
- Constructive interpersonal relationships – team members must respect each other's differences and trust each other.
- Active reinforcement systems – rewards are necessary to reinforce the behaviour wanted.
- Constructive external relationships – clear communication with management and resource providers is essential for the team's success.

The CBA network (CBA 2004:Internet) identified a few more factors that characterise effective project teams:

- In an effective project team there is a sense of direction, because there are set goals to achieve.
- There is a clear set of rules to be followed.
- There is clarity on the nature of the "problem".
- There is a broad sense of shared responsibility among team members.
- An effective project team makes use of positive feedback, recognition and rewards to motivate team members.
- There are effective ways of making decisions.
- There is a high level of commitment among members.
- Effective project teams are able to brainstorm.
- Effective project teams confront differences and handle conflict effectively.
- There is effective communication and members possess good listening skills.

Thus, from the different characteristics identified, it could be concluded that in an effective project team, the team members understand the project goals and objectives. They know exactly where the team is headed and they understand the nature of the problem that needs solving. Team members possess the relevant skills and knowledge necessary for the successful completion of the project and they know exactly what is expected of them. Team members respect each other and are able to communicate effectively. Team members are not afraid of expressing themselves

and they participate actively in problem-solving and brainstorming. Lastly, rewards are given to team members to motivate them.

However, knowing what characterises an effective project team is not enough. Managers need to know which steps to follow to build an effective project team. The CBA network (CBA 2004:Internet) provides some guidelines to achieve the above mentioned characteristics:

- **Create clear goals:** Members should be clear on the project goals and how they are going to achieve these goals. Kezsbom (2002:42) states that a common mistake made during team building, is not allowing the team to formulate its own mission and goals.
- **Encourage teams to go for small wins:** Attainable, short-term goals should be used to build confidence.
- **Build mutual trust:** Create a climate of openness where people are free to express their views without fear.
- **Ensure mutual accountability and a sense of common purpose:** All members should take responsibility for achieving project goals.
- **Provide the necessary external support:** Whatever resources the team needs to achieve success should be made available.
- **Training:** People need a number of skills to be good team members. Training should be provided to develop the necessary skills. Another common mistake made during team building, is failing to provide the necessary training for skill development (Kezsbom 2002:42).

These guidelines can be used to build an effective project team.

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE PROJECT TEAM

"The innovate point is the pivotal moment when talented and motivated people seek the opportunity to act on their ideas and dreams."
WA Porter

An effective project team is a group of highly motivated people who have clear goals and objectives, there is mutual trust among the members of the team and team

conflict is resolved in an orderly fashion without jeopardising the completion of the project.

Clear goals and objectives

Before setting performance targets for the project team, management must inform the team about the reason for its existence (Huczczko 1996:77). Then, in context of the organisational goals, the team members deserve to know what role they will play collectively as well as individually. Each person should know what function they fulfil on the team, how they fit in with the other functions and what will happen if they do not complete their assigned tasks (Pacelli 2005:39).

Project goals should only be formulated after gaining clarity on organisational and departmental goals, because project goals should be related to organisational goals (Maddux 1996:33). Lewis (1993:47) suggests drafting a mission statement. This will help team members stay focused. Kim (1995:251) believes the team's mission should be the basis for all their actions. When changes occur in the team structure or development, the mission statement should be rewritten, incorporating the necessary changes. Furthermore to prevent bias, certain rules and guidelines for team behaviour should be developed. The rules and guidelines should be agreed upon by all team members.

It is important for team members to realise that they are not only accountable to the project manager, but to the other team members. If one person fails, the whole team fails, therefore each team member must take responsibility for his/her role in the team and ensure that he/she performs his/her job accurately (Pacelli 2005:39).

Resolving team conflict

Conflict in project teams can severely hamper the quality of work carried out. Because project teams consist out of different kinds of people, with different characteristics, interests, needs and expectations of themselves and others, conflict is unavoidable. It is the team leader's responsibility to see the potential and current causes of conflict and help the team members to deal with the conflict in a constructive way.

First of all it might be helpful to look at some common problems that may give rise to conflict within a project team. Redman (1996:76) identified some typical problems that are easy to recognise within a team. These are:

- personality clashes
- envy
- feuds
- compulsive talkers
- personal relationships
- misunderstandings
- prejudice
- power seekers
- different work outputs
- unfair treatment
- personal hygiene
- different beliefs

Some of these problems are difficult to deal with. The team leader needs to try and determine what a team member's reaction to a specific problem might be as every person reacts differently to different types of problems.

Redman (1996:78) gives some simple guidelines in dealing with different types of problems. These guidelines are depicted in Table 3 below. The main goal is to resolve the problem as quickly as possible to avoid unnecessary conflict. An important consideration is open communication about the problem. When communication is open, conflict is resolved positively.

Table 3 Guidelines for dealing with problems

PROBLEM	TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM
Personality clashes	Invite team members to express their opinion in a civilised way. Try to reach a mutual agreement.
Envy	Ensure that each member in the team is listened to properly.
Feuds	Give each member an opportunity to say how a problem affects them personally and how they would suggest it is dealt with. Do not take sides.
Compulsive talkers	Give a time limit within which each member is allowed to speak during discussions.

Personal relationships	Point out any impact that is seen on team effectiveness and ask the people involved to come to their own agreement on how to handle things better.
Misunderstandings	Proper listening will prevent misunderstandings. Let each member listen to what another member has to say. Do not tolerate interruptions. Give each person an opportunity to explain exactly what he/she means.
Prejudice	Do not tolerate prejudice. Ask those at the end of prejudicial behaviour to say how they feel about it and what effect it has on them.
Power seekers	Encourage them to say exactly what they want and how they want to get it.
Different work outputs	Ask people what support they need and what they can offer.
Unfair treatment	Challenge those who see themselves as victims to say exactly why they feel that way.
Personal hygiene	Deal with the person individually and directly.
Different beliefs	Demonstrate that any belief is valid, except the ones that put other people down or insists that it is the only right one.

Source: Adapted from Redman 1996:78

It is clear from table 3 that communication forms an integral part of conflict prevention and resolution. Allowing each team member to express how he/she feels about a specific problem, builds trust within the project team. However, some problems like feuds, personal relationship problems and personal hygiene are more sensitive and should be handled with extra care. The team leader should facilitate problem solving and ensure that every member is treated fairly.

Team motivation

Striving towards a common goal works best when team members are motivated. Team spirit and camaraderie are very important for an effective project team. The feeling people get from being part of a team is a powerful motivator. According to Kim (1995:251) the satisfaction of a job well done is more rewarding than any prize or trophy. The motivational mindset of a team is like the daily tide that ebbs and

flows with the currents of each day's successes and failures. Therefore it is important for the project manager to keep his finger on the pulse and ensure that the team stays motivated.

According to Kim (1995:252) team motivation is significantly increased when:

- members sense that progress is being made
- members trust the project leader
- team participation is perceived as interesting and meaningful
- members are rewarded for their efforts
- members have mutual respect for each other

To keep morale up, key milestones should be celebrated (Pacelli 2005:39). Team members should be rewarded for their efforts. Motivating team members implies getting everyone involved. A team member becomes enthusiastic when his/her idea is perceived as valuable. Therefore project managers should create an atmosphere where team members feel they belong in the team. A feeling of belonging will develop into loyalty. Once a team member is loyal, he/she will be willing to make personal sacrifices for the good of the team.

CLOSURE

In today's complex, multinational and technologically sophisticated environment, unified team performance is crucial to project success. Globalization, privatization, digitization, and rapidly changing technologies, have transformed our economies into a hyper-competitive systems, where virtually every organisation is under pressure to do more things faster, better, and cheaper. A team working effectively together is seen as a key success factor in deriving competitive advantages from these developments. At the same time, the process of team-building has become more complex and requires more sophisticated management skills. To effectively and efficiently realize the project goal, project leaders must build fast, flexible project teams that can dynamically and creatively work toward achieving project objectives.

The characteristics of effective project teams serve as guidelines for building effective project teams. However, before an effective project team can be built, the right team members should be selected. After recruiting the team members, the process of building an effective, productive and motivated project team begins.

To ensure that effectiveness endures, project managers need to involve team members in the formulation of project goals and objectives. Conflict should be

resolved swiftly and positively through open communication. A motivated project team is a productive and satisfied project team. When team members feel a sense of belonging, they are loyal and willing to make personal sacrifices for the good of the team.

Strong project teams play an important role in ensuring competitive advantage in a dynamic environment.

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