

# Managing Project Teams

A project team can be defined as one that has a very specific mandate and a predetermined life, which could be anything from a few months to several years. Typically, project teams are formed to introduce new products, systems or operating methods, investigate problems, or to plan and deliver events.



Leading a project team can be a difficult job. The technical aspects of managing a project are well documented, with many different methodologies available. However, the people aspect of project management often receives much less attention, but can make the critical difference in determining the success of a project. This document includes a comprehensive summary of the characteristics of a project team and a guide to the issues that should be considered throughout the life cycle of a project team.

## How Project Teams Differ From Working Groups

Compared to a working group, such as a customer service team or a sales team, project teams can often be quite different. The key differences will include:

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- Team members may not have worked with each other previously and will therefore have many of the characteristics of a new team. This will be critical if the project life is very short.
- The team may meet infrequently, making it more difficult for relationships to form.
- Team members may be dispersed geographically, so that contact on a day-to-day basis will be limited.
- Most, if not all, of the team members will have a different line manager to the team leader, which can lead to divided loyalties, especially if involvement in the project is on a part-time basis.
- The team could be operating at the leading edge, possibly even on the boundaries of current knowledge. This may add to the pressure they are under.
- Most project teams have tough and sometimes unrealistic deadlines, which are often subject to outside influences.
- Project teams often have to develop new ways of operating, which may be quite different to what team members have previously been accustomed to.

## The Life Cycle of a Project Team

Below is a guide to the issues that should be considered throughout the life cycle of a project team. This guide is also a useful reference for creating and managing new teams successfully.

### 1. Recruiting Your Project Team

- Consider the roles that the project requires. At a practical level this may include technical knowledge, political know-how, financial decision-making power or communication skills.
- The benefit of having a member of the top team involved cannot be overemphasized. It is almost inevitable that there will come a point where you will need a quick executive decision or more resources. If he/she is involved, there is a good chance that there will be a personal commitment to ensuring project success. You will be surprised at the corners that can be cut!
- Consider the use of instruments to help with the selection process, e.g. the diagnostic tools developed by team expert Dr R Meredith Belbin for determining the different team roles essential to the effective running of a team. Other instruments might include Myers Briggs personality types,

Occupational Personality Questionnaires (OPQ's), or emotional intelligence questionnaires such as the BarOn EQ-i®.

- Liaise with the team members' line managers. Given that many project team members are borrowed and that their involvement is often in addition to their main role, you may need to reach an agreement with their managers regarding the time they have available to commit to the project and their resulting personal development from their involvement.

## 2. Building Your Project Team

Given that projects typically have a short life span and are under high pressure to achieve the deliverables within deadlines, the project manager has to be skilled in reaching the optimum performance stage as quickly as possible. There are a number of things a project manager can do to help progress the team; it is not likely to happen quickly and efficiently by itself. A project manager needs to consciously plan for this.

- Allocate time during the initial meeting(s) to build the team. This could be time set aside at the beginning of the agenda, or you may even want to allocate a specific session or away day for this purpose.
- Encourage team members to share individual strengths and what they each uniquely bring to the team.
- Facilitate a session in which individual and team values, the desired culture they wish to create for their team and some simple, practical ground rules for behavior between team members are shared.
- Establish from the outset a clear vision for the project, project deliverables/outputs, team and individual goals, performance/quality standards and key milestones. Review these continually, keeping the team focused on what needs to be achieved and what their personal contribution should be.
- Build in to the meetings an element of socializing where friendship can be fostered. This can be done in a number of ways. The timing and location of the meetings can have a significant impact on the atmosphere. Building in a short time at the beginning or end of a meeting where members can share information informally can also help members get to know each other personally. Meeting socially outside work is another example.

## 3. Inspiring Your Project Team

Your first opportunity to inspire your team will probably be at the selection stage when you are either looking for volunteers or approaching specific individuals to join the team. The second opportunity will be at your first meeting. You need to

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be clear about the project deliverables, the bottom line, and convert this into a vision to sell to the team.

It needs to be simple and memorable. For instance, during the Global BT Challenge Yacht Race in 1996, the Rover-sponsored boat team did some team-building before they went. They decided to develop a set of values that would guide them in everything that they did. They agreed on 'safe, happy, fast' as their values. They completed the race successfully, coming in second, and they were the only team who made it with all their crew intact.

The vision needs to spell out the value to the organization. From the outset you are doing a positive internal PR exercise. Creating a favorable image surrounding the project will help not only in the selection of team members, but will also keep them motivated throughout the project.

Encourage the team members to consider how they will personally benefit from their involvement. Benefits may include skill development, knowledge enhancement, recognition, increased network, career development, etc. If team members have an expectation of development, you need to work in partnership with their line manager to manage their re-entry to their work team to ensure this happens. Convey a positive image and reinforce this in everything associated with the project. This includes:

- **Visual or physical signals:** The project team's working environment or symbols such as uniforms can be very powerful
- **Branding:** Such as the label, look and quality of any literature produced
- **Team reputation:** How the project and the team are regarded by the rest of the organization and senior management. A communication strategy to regularly update the organization, highlight the achievement of goals and emphasize the project benefits is crucial for reinforcing this image.

If this is achieved, the team is more likely to feel proud to be associated with the project and motivated to succeed.

Incentive schemes can help to motivate the team. Some organizations make a link between project performance and material reward, e.g. team bonus.

Recognizing individual and/or team efforts through reward can help to create a positive culture. 'Thank-you' can be expressed in a number of ways, whether it be in the form of a personal letter from the Chief Executive, small present, or dinner/event for the team. This does not necessarily have to happen at the end of the project, but can be particularly effective at key milestones throughout.

## 4. Closing Down Your Project Team

This final stage involves the disengagement of relationships between team members and a short period of recognition for the team's achievements. Sometimes, concluding the operations of a team is disturbing for members, especially if they

have worked together for long periods of time. As project manager you have a number of responsibilities to ensure this stage is concluded successfully. In practice, this could be achieved by coordinating an event to formally mark the end of the relationship. This could be in the form of a final meeting, get-together or party. Whatever the context, ensure that you do the following:

- Recognize the efforts of all team members
- Communicate and celebrate the achievements of the project
- Examine how the team worked together and the effectiveness of the processes used, with a view to identifying improvements and encouraging development
- Make clear what the way forward is from here

It is also worth highlighting or exploring how team members have developed during their involvement and the resulting benefits they can take back to their work team on returning to their principal job.