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Improving Team Collaboration as a Project Manager

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### Abstract

This paper explores how project managers may improve collaboration amongst their project teams through effective communication, and shows effective strategies to use which encourage problem-solving. While there are various communication methods that project managers should understand, direct asynchronous routes, direct synchronous routes and indirect routes (Kennedy, 2017), having proper communication plans in place for each party involved in the project mitigates communication issues. This paper also addresses how project managers can effectively recruit team members, solve interpersonal conflict within the team, and create positive team mental models (Hsu, Chang, Klein, Jiang, 2011) which improve the team's problem-solving capabilities.

*Keywords:* communication methods, project management, team collaboration

### Improving Team Collaboration as a Project Manager

Project managers have a multitude of responsibilities as it relates to their job function. They are responsible for project planning, the organization of project teams, developing budgets, analyzing risk, monitoring progress, communicating with stakeholders and customers, as well as seeing projects through to their completion. A project has many different driving factors that which make it successful, but none is more important than the project team. According to *Project Management: The Managerial Process*, “Project managers provide direction, coordination, and integration to the project team, which is often made up of part-time participants loyal to their functional departments” (Gray & Larson, 2018, p. 9). While project team members have an allegiance to their specific department within the organization, it is the project managers job to effectively manage relationships so that the project team can flourish for the duration of the project life cycle. Project managers have the ability to guide the project team, and without proper communication methods and problem-solving strategies that are implemented by the project manager, the project will systematically suffer.

### **Project Communication**

#### **Stakeholders**

An integral part of success for projects is how effectively the project manager is able to communicate with the project team, as well as the various groups associated with the project. An important party involved with most projects other than the project manager and the project team are stakeholders. Stakeholders are management representatives who have a vested interest in the project, usually because they provide funding or the project fulfills a vision they have for the company. Communication with stakeholders is a primary concern of the project manager, as most projects start as an idea amongst stakeholders and are subsequently passed along to the

project manager for completion. A common problem that can occur amongst stakeholders and project managers is a clear communication plan to ensure that each party is satisfied with the progress of the project. According to “Effective Communication For Project Success,” “It is rare for a stakeholder group to have the same level or type of engagement with a project as does the project team. Because of this, the project team must be careful that their communications do not assume too much or too little of others” (Cervone, 2014, p. 8). The project manager must make an effort to get to know the personalities of each stakeholder, and how they like to stay informed over the life of the project. If a stakeholder prefers a laissez-faire approach, meaning that they have a mutual trust of the project manager for fulfill their vision without active involvement, it would be wise to communicate this fact with the project team. Rather than schedule frequent meetings or give status updates via email after each deliverable is completed, the project manager can set milestones with their project team. When these milestones are reached, the project manager can update the stakeholder so that they feel included in the project, but not overwhelmed with information that they typically would not care to know at all. Project managers have an obligation to stakeholders, and this obligation has a domino effect on how the project manager must manage the project team. Effectively communicating with stakeholders allow the project manager to formulate a plan with the project team, so that progress can be tracked appropriately.

### **Project Kickoff Meeting**

Establishing relationships and connecting appropriate individuals with each other at the start of a new project is an integral part of being an effective project manager. Typically, project managers will hold a project kickoff meeting with all of the key parties to ensure that everyone’s goals are aligned for the project, and to introduce the basic fundamentals for how the project will

be completed. According to Jason Orloske, PMP, “Depending on the size and complexity, I may hold two kickoffs – one with the stakeholder group, such as functional managers, department heads and such, and one with the project team doing the work. The goal is to talk about how the project aligns to organizational goals and how each person’s role contributes to success”

(Strategic Kick-Start, 2019, p. 1). But as a project manager, what makes the project kickoff meeting so important? Why doesn’t the project manager just meet with each team member individually and spend more time specifically defining the team member’s role on the project?

The project kickoff meeting is essential because it establishes trust and allows the project manager and project team to become associated with each other so that they can begin to establish working relationships. It is also important to bring team members together in order to establish a collective heartbeat for the group. During the executing phases of the project, it is rare for the project team to work in the same section of the office as the project manager as well as the other team members, as most project teams are assembled from various departments throughout the organization. Due to the members of the project team being spread out amongst the building from each other, it is obvious that any problems that arise cannot be addressed right away by face-to-face interaction. This is especially true when multiple project team members are working on the same work package, and need oversight from the project manager. These scenarios indicate why the project kickoff meeting is an essential part of a project manager’s duties. Team members are much more likely to initiate contact with each other, as well as effectively work together when they already have a previous relationship and share the same vision for the project.

## Communication Methods

Establishing preferred communication methods with the project team during the project kickoff meeting is the most effective way to ensure everyone is on the same page. In order to mitigate the escalation of conflict amongst project team members, and increase productivity when information needs to be shared, the project manager must make it clear to all team members what their expectations are in order to maximize communication. According to “Optimizing Multi-Team System Behaviors: Insights From Modeling Team Communication,” there are three distinct types of communication that project managers should utilize depending on the situation. The three types highlighted and analyzed in the study are direct asynchronous routes, direct synchronous routes, and indirect routes.

**Direct asynchronous routes.** The first method of communication analyzed are direct asynchronous routes, which are, “...those where members utilize asynchronous tools (e.g., computer mediated e-mail, virtual blackboards, or file sharing)...these tools support smaller amounts of information, thereby leading to quick messages that require low generation costs” (Kennedy, 2017, p. 14). While utilizing these methods for quick day-to-day updates, the research shows that lower quality communication is achieved overall due to the lack of two-way interaction between the sender and receiver.

**Direct synchronous routes.** The second method of communication are direct synchronous routes, which are used when, “...members engage in simultaneous communication that may include audio and visual interaction such as web-conferencing, telephone, and face-to-face. Researchers have argued that verbal and non-verbal communication are necessary for team members to coordinate task functions and to develop a common understanding of the issue” (Kennedy, 2017, p. 15). This method of communication requires more costs due to the fact that

each party must take time to engage in these methods, and scheduling could factor into future communications. While there are cost drawbacks, the quality of interactions are higher than asynchronous communication because a conversation is being had between the two parties which includes verbal and non-verbal cues.

**Indirect routes.** The third method, indirect routes, "...[are] where members utilize team leaders in sharing information. Team members may act as information mediators (Hoegly & Gemuenden, 2001) which may help facilitate coordination between the teams, and the overall efforts of members" (Kennedy, 2017, p. 15). This method of communication defines what a project manager utilizes when interacting with the project team. When a project manager needs to share information or instruction with a team member, they must be able to communicate their needs in a way that the team member will understand. Project managers must oversee the progress of each team member in their particular job function, so it is apparent that the project manager understand a wide variety of subjects and be able to converse in the same language as the individual. This skill is also beneficial when multiple team members from different departments have to work together on a particular task or work package. Having a project manager who can help facilitate the team members and improve their cohesiveness saves time and prevents communication blocks between members. Indirect routes of communication also produce a hierarchical structure that the project team can follow, allowing for a direct superior to offer guidance and direction for the next steps in a project (Kennedy, 2017, p. 15). The downside of this structured communication route is that the project manager may have a limited amount of time to interact with groups of team members, as periodical appointments can add up and waste crucial time.

### **Communication Management Plan**

As project managers become aware of the various types of communication methods that drive collaboration amongst the team, they must formulate a plan that fits the needs of the project. As each communication method highlighted has varying strengths and weaknesses, it is the project managers duty to implement strategies and guidelines for how they believe project team members should work with each other depending on the situation. According to the *AMA Handbook of Project Management*, “During the planning phase, the project manager is required to outline a detailed strategic plan that covers all component areas” (Mepyans-Robinson, 2006, p. 166). The communication management plan should include, “...where to archive project documentation, the process of project reporting...how to distribute schedules, timesheets, and risks/logs throughout the project, when and where status reports will be announced or sent to team members, stakeholders, and customers” (Mepyans-Robinson, 2006, p. 166). Once the communication management plan is understood by all team members, it should be distributed and updated by the project manager over the life cycle of the project.

### **Problem Solving**

#### **Recruiting**

While problems and setbacks are common in any project, it is the project manager’s job to not only command the team’s efforts to resolve these issues, but assemble the best possible team before the project begins. According to *Project Management: The Managerial Process*, “When selecting and recruiting team members, project managers naturally look for individuals with the necessary experience and knowledge/technical skills critical for project completion. At the same time, there are less obvious considerations that need to be factored into the recruitment

process” (Gray & Larson, 2018, p. 382). While availability, credibility, ambition, and technological expertise are among the considerations for selecting team members, a person’s problem-solving ability is at the top of the list (Gray & Larson, 2018). Project managers want to recruit members who will be able to adapt to the current state of any project, and will not be discouraged when faced with a situation that requires critical thinking. Another important characteristic to look for in a potential team member is one that is not always measurable, but can be identified through past performance or an interview process. Manuel Perez, PMP, states, “...I selected a candidate for a position on the project team based on attitude and potential. Other candidates had more experience and knowledge but simply did not come across as someone who would grow and be passionate about the job. Passion for projects matters” (That Special Something, 2015, p. 10). If a project manager can identify potential team members that have an innate drive to contribute and complete impactful projects, they are much more unlikely to become discouraged or give up when faced with a problem relating to the project.

### **Managing Interpersonal Conflict**

There are a multitude of problems that can wreak havoc on a project and the project team. As the project manager is in charge of all facets of the project, it is important for the project manager to have an understanding of how to minimize the impact of problems and to implement strategies to solve them. One type of problem that can occur is conflict amongst project team members. Disputes can arise over a disagreement on how to move forward with a project task, team members could miss important deadlines that have an effect on another team member, or the quality of work of one project team member could impact the subsequent tasks of another. With a workforce that is continually diversifying, conflicts must be handled with appropriate understanding of both parties so that each member feels as if their point of view is valued and

that they are not being treated unfairly. Project managers must sometimes act as mediators of conflict, having a diplomatic approach to resolve issues that impact various team members.

According to “Negotiation and Resolution of Conflict Using AHP: An Application to Project Management,” “A sense of being treated fairly in a resolution process is important for the satisfaction of the parties involved as it ensures a stable outcome” (Al-Tabtabai & Thomas, 2004, p. 4). Project managers must intervene in disputes that effect the project as quickly as possible, so as to not prolong the conflict over the life of the project. Being personable and having understanding of both party’s point of view allow the project manager to formulate an action plan that is fair and gets the project back on track. It also sets the precedent to other team members that problems can be resolved quickly and resolutely with the guidance of their project manager.

### **Building A Collaborative Environment**

It is understood amongst all project managers that problems will arise over the life cycle of any project. Anticipating potential problems can only go so far as to prepare the project team for what lies ahead in a potential project. While it is necessary to formulate effective communication plans and recruit the right individuals to be a part of a project team, it is also worth every effort of the project manager to create an environment where team members are comfortable to collaborate. Project managers can set guidelines and strategies for the project team to follow, but if team members are not comfortable working with each other, then it will be hard for them to work together and share ideas when problems arise. According to the article, “Exploring The Impact of Team Mental Models on Information Utilization and Project Performance in System Development,” “Team cognition refers to the team mental models (TMMs) collectively held by a group of individuals that enable them to effectively communicate

and accomplish tasks by acting as a coordinated unit. These mental models serve as potential factors in completing tasks and should indicate the likelihood of having an effective team (Cannon-Bowers and Salas, 2001, Mohammed and Dumville, 2001)” (Hsu, Chang, Klein, Jiang, 2011, p. 2). In order for the project manager to create team mental models, there are various strategies and techniques that can be used to help create a collaborative team. Team building activities are an outlet that effectively builds relationships and positive mental models amongst participants. Being able to work as a team in a stress-free environment that is without real pressure will allow team members to collaborate freely and have fun. These activities are important to utilize from the beginning of the project team formation as well as throughout the life of the project (Hsu et al., 2011). Another way in which a project manager can support team collaboration is to acknowledge the project team’s success publicly. Project managers should not shy away from when a huge milestone is reached by the team, instead they should show their appreciation to the project team. In order for the team to continue to improve and work well together, the morale of the group is important to notice as a project manager. When a team’s successes are praised in an open forum, the individuals feel more connected to each other and will seek the same satisfaction until project completion.

### **Conclusion**

Project managers must be able to lead project teams effectively in order to fulfill a project’s completion on time and on budget. Having proper communication with each party involved with the project, as well as setting guidelines to follow allow clear communication paths which help project managers monitor project communication. Evaluating and selecting potential project team members is also a huge part of a project’s success, as project managers must select team members that will be able to think critically, problem solve, and thrive within a

team-based environment. It is important for project managers to understand the backgrounds of all project team members, as well as create a positive environment in order to spark innovation and team collaboration.

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