

High Performance Project Planning

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Every organization regularly faces tasks that need to be accomplished. As these tasks become larger and more complex, they tend to be more time sensitive and have a greater impact on the organization. When they reach a certain level of importance and complexity, we tend to refer to them as projects. The larger the financial impact of the project the greater the urgency. As these projects reach farther into the organization touching numerous individuals and departments they become much more complex and have far reaching impact. Critical projects are those that are important, urgent, impact finances and have far reaching effects. For these types of critical projects, team based project planning is almost always the best option (Grant and Baumann,2005).

Key factors in building a good team

Before any team can succeed, their goals and objectives must be documented and understandable by the entire organization. That means management must first be absolutely clear on what they want the team to accomplish, and it is best if they can describe their desires in terms of a future state vision, or what the ultimate outcomes of the teams' efforts would be. Another way to say it is 'What will be different when you are finished than it is today, assuming your team is successful?'

In line with clear goals, the team must have a say in what those goals will be. They have to be engaged early in decision making processes and feel as if they have had

some input. Otherwise there is a tendency to resist the process. A common adage says that those who plan the battle don't battle the plan.

When looking for team members, success is best accommodated when individuals of authority in all key areas the efforts will touch are involved in the selection of prospective team members from their respective departments or areas. Ideally you want team members who have a demonstrated history of setting milestones and achieving them. You want strong familiarity with departmental operations and knowledge of the dependencies that exist with others in the organization. (Lage and Tyagi, 2006)

Perhaps one of the most critical skills for developing a strong, high performance project team is communications (Kaleba, 2006). Another saying the consulting community likes to leverage is that the biggest problem with communication is the perception that it is actually occurring. All too often we see examples of people talking to one another without either realizing neither party understands what the other person is trying to communicate, and vice versa. Communication is an art that is one third listening, one third speaking, and one third observing. Those people that see communication as telling, or silently listening, are missing the critical aspect of absorbing and understanding. If the members of the team have good communication skills, they are much more likely to develop a sense of rapport and understanding of each other. After all, this will be a group of people whose job it is to first understand each other, and then apply that knowledge for the good of the entire organization.

Ensuring communication is actually happening

Since communication is such a critical component of an effective or high performance project team, ensuring it is in happening becomes a continuous effort. A highly effective way to do that is to put all activities, plans, and outcomes in writing. When actions are documented, something special happens to the words. Have you ever said something to someone and had them ask you to repeat yourself, only to struggle to find your words a second time even if it has been moments since you first uttered them? When you write things down, you lose the ability to control or observe who will read them, and you take far more care in what you write. It also has a positive impact on your ability to be clear and ensure your words are being understood as you intended.

One of the first steps on this communications journey is to create and implement a communication plan. Communications plans include individuals that can benefit from regular updates and information, the frequency of those communications, the manner in which they occur, and the information being delivered. For example, there may be certain individuals that need daily updates, while others need information on a quarterly basis. Some individuals may want their information orally in a weekly face to face 15 minute meeting; others may prefer an email, memo or white paper. Some may want very high level overview status such as 'the project is on track and moving forward, milestones are being achieved' and others may want highly detailed or technical information that requires more time and energy to communicate.

By identifying these individuals and the communications efforts that need to be happening, you can build a systemic mechanism for ensuring the team acts professional and surprises are avoided.

Senior management is critical in this communications process even if they express a desire to be left out. The project team must find a way to deliver a minimal amount of information to them regardless of their interest or desire to be in the loop. Once something happens that they don't like, you need to be able to demonstrate that their authority had been honored and critical information had been delivered. If you make this clear up front, you will not only gain their respect, you will also help educate and inform the leadership about what is going on tactically in the organization they are leading.

Finally, team members must be assigned specific roles so authority and responsibility is clear up front. A team cannot develop synergy without structure, and efforts cannot be verified nor can progress be assessed without clear roles and responsibilities assigned to each team member and understood by all others.

Risks of the team approach

Even though teams are a highly effective way to tackle projects, they carry great risk as does all group efforts. Human beings are very different, and there will always be conflicts between them as well as between departments. Individual and departmental needs and wants often conflict by the very nature of their existence.

Another great risk springs from the need to give the project team authority to make decisions and act on them. This gives rise to the potential for abuse of power and for pride of ownership/authorship issues to arise. A simple example that demonstrates this risk can be envisioned when two people from different areas of the organization accomplish the same task using different approaches, and both are highly successful. For one to insist on using their approach even though the other has their own way of doing things creates conflict that has no obvious solution. Without the ability to compromise and share authority, efforts come to a stand still. Another reason why roles and responsibilities are so important.

Another interesting and dependable problem that will arise is that people have varied style of communication. Some are quiet and reflective like engineers and scientists while others are demonstrative and speak freely and in a direct manner, such as sales people. In this category of problems that will most always arise is one of work habits that can create scheduling and work processing issues (Leedal and Smith, 2006)). This needs to be discussed and resolved early in the forming of the team and its' members.

There are other risks more external to the team itself. Two tend to be somewhat common and can create substantial roadblocks to success. The first is one of productivity. The best staff members tend to make the best team members. When teams consume staff time of the most productive and effect staff members, many other areas tend to suffer due to lack of attention. The second is great risk has to do with projects

that exist to fail. This can come about when management wants to appear as if they are trying to accomplish something but really are looking for an excuse to say no because deep down they want the project to fail and the new initiative to go away. It is also possible for project teammates to blame personal failures on to other teammates, and for the team to blame management. Once again the importance of clarity and documentation are demonstrated through the need to be clear about what success looks like and avoid creating scapegoats.

Benefits of the team approach

Even with all the risks, there is no better way to improve communication between departments, increase understanding and empathy for how different groups depend on one another, and to distribute best practices, tips, tricks and tools throughout the organization. When a team undertakes a project, and that team is representative of the entire organization, everyone has something they can be proud of. The broad based buy-in will also help to ensure acceptance and minimize recidivism throughout the organization, including the executive circle.

Using a team approach to project planning and execution has positive and negative aspects uniquely related to teams. It also brings substantial benefits that often make the difference between a successful project and one that fails or becomes stalled. The risks are easy to mitigate if they are identified early enough in the process and a high performance project team is created as outlined in this document. The benefits that arise are organic growing out of the active involvement of the team and tend to over shadow

the negatives. With proper preparation and attention to detail, an organization can have a geometric effect on productivity and morale that dramatically outweighs the risks of using teams for project planning.

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