CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF PROJECT TEAMS

Excerpt from
Achieving Project Management Success Using Virtual Teams
by Parviz F. Rad & Ginger Levin
J.ROSS PUBLISHING

While the primary focus of the team is on the final deliverables and technical results of the project, the team’s focus is also on the activities and processes that facilitate the delivery of the product or service. The team members work to deliver that product or service by using best practices and procedures. The success of these practices and procedures would depend partly on how much contentment the individual team members derive from an increased knowledge of the personal and professional attributes of the other team members. In turn, this contentment with personal knowledge would lead to satisfaction with the process by which the team accomplishes its work. One positive side effect of these personal ties among team members is that the team members show an interest in working together on future projects.

Success of an individual team member in performing his or her project duties can be predicted based on the behavioral dimensions of that person. By extrapolation, the success of the team would be the sum total of the incremental success of the individual team members. This concept would hold for virtual teams as well as traditional teams. Ten critical dimensions of a synergistic virtual team (See Figure below) are presented in this section. Effective performance in these ten critical areas will lead to maximum performance for the individual and, by extension, to optimal performance of the team. Further, improvements in one or more of these dimensions will result in improvements in team behaviors, which in turn lead to improved overall project performance and ultimately to organizational success. What follows is a brief description of each of the ten team dimensions and why they are important to the virtual team.

1 A Strong Commitment to the Goals and Objectives of the Project

Generally speaking, a commitment is an agreement concerning the work to be done. In the context of a project, completing the work involves delivery of the product or facilitation of the service on time, within budget, and according to specifications. The visual reminder of the frantic pace of project work, so characteristic of traditional co-located projects, is often missing in the virtual project. It is possible that a team member might be unaware of changes in scope, changes in a project milestone, changes in the delivery date of other team members’ tasks, changes in the overall project budget, changes in overall project direction, or changes in the organizational strategic direction. As a result, other work obligations of this team member, particularly any on-site work, often assume a higher priority. Under these circumstances, one might lose sight of the project's objectives and how one's piece of the project contributes to the overall desired outcome. A common purpose will serve as a solid foundation for the procedures that prioritize team activities. It is through commitment that team members will give the project's goals and objectives their best effort. If all team members commit to the goals of the project, the stage is set for cooperative relationships among team members, an attitude of trust, and increased motivation. All of these factors would ultimately result in a product that meets or exceeds the project's goals.
2 A Collaborative Environment for Project Work

Typically, the early stages of a project set the tone for each individual's degree of involvement. Therefore, people must feel involved from the beginning of the project. Team members need to understand the goals and objectives of the project, how the goals and objectives relate to the overall organizational objectives, and then how their individual work packages dovetail into the project deliverable. The team environment should encourage dialogue and interaction about the project's goals and objectives, the reasons for the team structure, the approach for meeting the goals and objectives, the processes and procedures the team will use to complete its work, and methods to resolve issues. Ideally, team members should actively participate in decision-making processes that impact their work on the project. It is fascinating that, under some circumstances, collaboration is even viewed as cheating (Parker, 1994). Nonetheless, the team must identify those forces and behavioral traits that might hinder effective teamwork, in order to put measures in place to lessen their impact.

Further, since most project work involves tasks with multiple dependencies, these dependencies must be clearly identified. Then, the involved team members should establish and document mutually agreed-upon mechanisms for coordinating interdependent work. For example, if it becomes evident that a scheduled milestone date cannot be met, team members must communicate such a forecast to each other. Then, the team will have the opportunity to proactively revise the contributing dates through mutual agreement among all those affected.

The team members become involved and connected if they are prompted to share thoughts, ideas, and concerns, particularly if this exchange is conducted as a group of peers. An emphasis on collaborative leadership will provide an atmosphere in which team members respond affirmatively to situations where they are called upon to influence, direct, and motivate others.

3 Demonstrated Credibility in All Aspects of Project Work

Each member of the team should demonstrate high performance standards. This behavior includes organizing and managing time productively so as to complete assigned tasks as promised. It also includes providing timely information to others to help enhance their work on the project. Individual team members should take time to gather and analyze data before making decisions that affect the project. A nonjudgmental attitude toward each person's ideas should be displayed during these deliberations. It also is important for each person to know the roles and responsibilities of the other team members. If previous experiences have demonstrated the competencies and dedication of a team member, then there would be justified expectation that other team members would more readily feel comfortable in accepting this team member's opinions and results without any concerns about accuracy and reliability. Under these circumstances, team members can easily express confidence in the skills and abilities of others. If information on previous behavior is not available, then team members initially might approach the project with the hopeful expectation that all team members were selected because of their unique expertise that would enable them to make significant contributions to project success. Part and parcel of this hopeful expectation is that there is some level of anxiety while personal data are being accumulated to support these expectations. The positive foundation provided by personal knowledge and mutual expectations will not eliminate the incidents of disagreements. However, this atmosphere will minimize the probability that full disclosure and veracity of statements will be the subject of such debates.

4 Effective Communication among Project Team Members and Stakeholders

Effective conduct of a traditional team requires open and frequent communication, but the need for communication is even greater in the virtual teams, where frequent face-to-face interaction is unavailable. Miscommunication can create hard feelings that might remain undetected for a long time, thereby undermining team success. Open communication must be encouraged so that every team member feels comfortable contributing to discussions and debates. Project debates are exceptionally useful, because it is during these debates that team members provide useful and important information to other team members. Improving communication involves identifying information needs and ways to best share information among the team. Predictable and effective communication will help maintain trust and momentum among team members. Communication policies of the team must provide an environment that ensures that the information that is shared is of value to the project.

There are many different communication tools that can be used. In order to ensure that the flow of information among the team is unencumbered, the team should be given the opportunity to draft protocols as to when each tool should be used. Early involvement of team members sets the stage for encouraging them to work with one another to develop effective ways to communicate project information. Team meetings, face to face or virtual, should further be viewed as results oriented and generally as a useful way to spend time. These meetings must be planned and managed so that the meeting time is used effectively. Then, each team member would participate actively in the meeting and will not be tempted to conduct other business during a meeting just because he or she is not visible to the rest of the team.
Additionally, each team member should take responsibility for being heard and for being understood. It would be quite useful if team members used agreed-upon methods to stay in contact with each other. These contacts between team members throughout the project life cycle would serve as starting points to discuss ideas, issues, insights, and information.

5 A Sense of Community within the Project Team with a Focus on Professional Responsibility in All Activities

An atmosphere of openness and trust is required if the project team is expected to work together successfully. By definition, each team member should start the project trusting other team members by way of eliciting and respecting the values of others. Each team member should behave with honesty and give other team members the benefit of the doubt. Tolerance and compromise should be exercised in interactions both with team members and with other project stakeholders. Further, each team member should work to eliminate any conflicts of interests that may exist. In such an environment, team members will be encouraged to make a specific commitment to the performance of others in completing the project. By placing an emphasis on sharing ideas, lessons learned, and best practices, the sense of community will be greatly enhanced. If team members use appropriate judgment in project work, and foster integrity, the quality of the project can only improve. Improved quality of the project work will delight the client and team members alike.

6 An Emphasis on Continuous Improvement in Personal and Team Skills and Knowledge

Ideally, each team member should have a personal learning agenda. Individuals should be motivated, and also afforded opportunities, to develop new skills and to enhance their knowledge of the profession's specialty areas. Each person should take an active role to define and develop the skills that he or she would need for further advancement. In addition, each team member should make a commitment to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the team's processes and procedures in delivering the project's deliverables. Unfortunately, effective teamwork, team behavior, team learning, and collaboration are not the norm in all project environments, primarily because most organizations emphasize individual accomplishments. Literature shows that people need instruction on how to be effective team players and that continuous improvement must be fostered. Continuous improvement programs should be set up so they encourage individual team members, and the team as a whole, to propose improvements to processes and procedures. An important ingredient of a continuous improvement program is that it must have explicit support of the parent organization of the project.

7 Effective Conflict Resolution among Team Members

Conflicts are an inevitable part of any project because people can and will differ with each other when it comes to identifying and pursuing the best path to a solution. The primary sources of conflict are the triple constraints, although conflicts also will occur concerning personalities, priorities, coordination problems, legal or ethical issues, interdependent commitments, new ideas, technology, and business strategies. Team members are more likely to be motivated to do their best if they know that the conflicts that are certain to arise will be handled in an open and cooperative way. Sometimes the team might require assurance that if conflicts involve a small group of team members, confidentiality will be preserved. There might also be times when only the parties involved in the conflict would need to participate in the resolution discussions. On the other hand, there may be times when the entire team must be informed of the outcome of a conflict.

8 An Emphasis on Creative Curiosity in Project Activities

In the same fashion that a team member would strive to foster incremental improvements in products and processes, the team must be on the lookout for radical and quantum improvements in processes, prevailing techniques, tools, and deliverables. Team members should be of the mind-set that breakthroughs are not only desirable but also attainable. Therefore, the team must keep a watchful eye on sources of opportunity during the project life cycle. It is entirely possible that quantum advancements in one area of the deliverable can be generated by someone who works on another facet of the deliverable but somehow developed the vision of this advancement. The result of such team spirit is that the project, and possibly the entire organization, can achieve unprecedented levels of performance. Thus, a sense of community will develop around the technical content of the project. Finally, technical creativity of project personnel will become a source of nourishment for entrepreneurial challenges of the parent organization.
9 Recognition of the Contributions of Other Team Members to the Project's Goals and Objectives

Success should be central to the team's culture. Early successes can help build a winning attitude and set the direction of the entire project toward success. Then, with the habit of success created early in the project, team members will be motivated to continue on a successful path. Each team member can help in this area by taking actions to reduce negative features of the overall project performance. Internal and external influences on team performance must be analyzed in order to identify and remove barriers to project performance.

Each team member should recognize other team members' contributions. This type of recognition should be directed at team members who champion ideas as well as those who support the ideas of others. There is no question that any team member will welcome genuine, positive reinforcement, particularly if the reinforcement is considered recognition by a valued professional peer. Thus, each team member should look for opportunities to create and celebrate the success of the individuals on the team as well as the success of the overall team (Skulmoski and Levin, 2001). Finally, some type of team celebrations should be held to provide public praise for individual and team efforts.

10 An Attitude of Consideration toward Other Team Members during the Project

In a cohesive and productive team, helping others succeed is as important as one's own success. Even when disagreements occur, each team member should treat other team members in a fair and consistent matter, showing genuine concern and interest. Further, personal accusations should be avoided. Each team member should show a willingness to take time to listen, and to understand, the points of view of the other team members. Genuine concern and interest should be shown even during periods of technical disagreements. Communication should not be condescending, and each person should treat other team members as equals. Corrective feedback should be provided in a constructive manner based on technical issues rather than personalities. This pattern of behavior will promote long-lasting relationships among team members.