Building Relationships in Project Management

~ By Michael L Young

Building relationships is just as important within the project team as it is outside. Good relationships can be the difference between outstanding success and dismal failure because it’s all about getting people to like and trust you so that they will deliver what you need them to deliver at the right time in the right way.

We have talked previously about managing stakeholders, finding out about and managing their needs and expectations, however this is much easier if you have developed good relationships with stakeholders in the first place.

Networking Helps Build Relationships

Networking (internal and external) is essentially about building solid business relationships. To do this you need good skills in creating rapport and listening.

If you can make a connection with people on subjects you have a genuine interest in, their confidence in you will grow. Use this connection to engage them and then ask genuine questions and just listen. They’ll often tell you what you need to know. Strong bonds will inevitably stem from commonalities discovered in simple conversation.

Getting Personal

Building good relationships means being truly interested in the people you deal with, both from a business and personal view. While discussing business issues is usually the main purpose of speaking with someone, finding out something personal about them takes the relationship to the next level.

Learning about hobbies, special interests, family, accomplishments, leisure time activities, organisation memberships, and special dates such as birthdays will help you make a deeper connection with them.

The important thing is what you do with the information. When dealing with team members, suppliers, clients and stakeholders try to mix personal information in the conversation. Every contact doesn’t have to be about business. It’s about peeling away the layers of formality and resistance to improve your chances of achieving what you want to achieve from the interaction.

Establish a Culture That Favours Relationships

The best project managers are those that develop a good sense of community within the project team. Establishing a healthy culture as part of that community can help win the hearts and minds of clients, staff and
suppliers. Culture is about sharing values and a healthy culture will be one that has people who care about each other. In projects it’s about creating a ‘community’ within the project team that shares a common purpose.

It's not just a nice idea. A healthy culture can give a team an edge both in performance and in attracting good quality team members which is of vital importance. A good culture includes (often unspoken) expectations about the way things are done. In a project team these can be about how members respond to inquiries, how they greet each other, and how they behave when the pressure is on.

It’s about treating people with respect and listening to their point of view. This doesn’t mean you have to agree, but it does mean you respect their right to think differently and to express their views.

Cultures need leaders to set expectations and offer guidance on what's important. As a project manager you will need to be aware that people are watching you for clues as to how to behave in relationships with others. Actions speak louder than words.

Supplier Relationships

The contractual relationship is often one that's all about who has the power. One of the best ways that project managers can improve their supplier relationships is to develop loyalty. Loyalty is a two-way street and to earn trust of suppliers, project team members need to demonstrate their value. It includes being professional and respectful in dealings with suppliers, being efficient in delivery of orders and specifications and working one-on-one when the supplier needs it.

In essence, it's about remembering that suppliers are people too and will respond well to a personal touch. When making a judgment about how their client will be treated, a supplier can't help but consider how he or she is treated by that organisation. Project managers can cultivate supplier loyalty through open and honest communication. Keep them informed about major decisions and show them you have thought about how decisions will impact on them.

IT Projects Also Require Good Relationships

All this applies very well in IT projects. Too much of interaction within the IT industry is about technical information and people are too often forgotten. However when people start talking, listening and understanding each other, communication is improved and productive relationships are developed. IT can deliver solutions if the people involved understand what the client is asking for.

Good Relationships Are Key to Success

It's easy to have good relationships when everything is running smoothly. But relationships really count when the project or related activities start to come undone. If you don't do or say something on the basis of 'preserving the relationship,' think again…if the situation is such, the relationships might not be worth preserving.

As with anything that involves people, establishing processes to encourage good communication and relationships and make clear expectations, provides the cornerstone for success in any project.

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