Developing a High Performance Project Team

By Dick Grimes

Much is written in Project Management journals about every conceivable facet of project teams. Topics about their organisation, culture, communication with clients, problem solving skills, etc. are virtually endless. There are lots of rules, tips, and suggestions about what they should do but not as much on how to do it.

For example, “high performance work teams” has been a catch phrase for a long time. Everyone wants to create one or think they are a part of one. But how would a project manager actually develop one? If you aren’t sure, this will get you started in the right direction.

Prepare the Project Environment

1. Publish the project mission statement with clearly expressed terms of quality, quantity, and time in 25 words or less.

"We will design a document processing workflow that is capable of processing at least 1,500 documents (quantity) daily (time) with no errors (quality).” 25 words or less helps you keep it simple and the project team members focused on the desired outcome.

There should be much greater detail about desired deliverables in the project scope, of course, but a simple and direct summary can be very useful for the daily workings of the team. For example, any decision that a team member may be facing can be simplified by using the mission statement: "If doing task X helps us get closer to processing a minimum of 1,500 documents a day with no errors, we should do it. If it doesn't serve the mission, don't do it."

2. Identify the 3-5 key project-focused tasks for which each member is responsible and also include a team-focused task such as “teamwork”.

Publish the few team positions and what you expect from each. For example, team leaders may be responsible for project-focused tasks such as conducting weekly meetings with their sub-teams with minutes kept and distributed; scheduling and tracking work schedules; collecting specific reports weekly, summarising them, and forwarding to the project manager; resolving conflicts between members or with other sub-teams.

There is also a critical team-focused task simply called “teamwork”. Expectations within this may include reliability, co-operation with others, helpfulness, and knowledge sharing. This reminds team members that we have obligations to each other as well as to the client.

3. Clearly define each team member’s key task expectations regarding performance toward project goals with a range of measurable performance levels so they can self-monitor their performance progress.

This takes us back to grade school when we always knew how we were doing before the report cards came out. The teacher had a grading scale against which we compared the feedback we received from scores on homework, book reports, and tests. This allowed us to self-regulate our performance whether we wanted to make the honour roll or just keep our grades high enough that our parents didn't ground us.

A project team member's expectations may be expressed like this on a 1-5 scale where 5 is most desirable and 1 is least desirable. A 3.0 score is considered the "least acceptable."
Project team leaders performance assessment scale for submitting a project report is:

- Accurate, following format, and submitted >1 day early = 5.0
- Accurate, following format, and submitted 1 day early = 4.0
- Accurate, following format and on time = 3.0
- Accurate, following format and less than 1 day late = 2.0
- Any combination of errors, not following format, and late any amount = 1.0

4. Clearly define each team member’s key task expectations regarding performance toward teamwork goals with a range of measurable performance levels so they can self-monitor their performance progress.

You can use a similar technique for the “teamwork” requirement. Distribute a questionnaire among the team members asking for their opinion on a sliding scale of 1-5 where 1 = “never see this” to 5 = “always see this”. Include an option of “not observed” for new members who don’t feel they have been there long enough to make a fair assessment.

Please rate your assessment of each team member’s behaviour in these areas:

- Reliability
- Co-operation with others
- Helpfulness
- Knowledge Sharing

The performance score of an individual team member in these teamwork categories would be the average of the responses from team members for each of the four behaviours above. Again, an average of 3.0 would be the least acceptable score.

A project manager can shift much of the weight of managing the team members from his or her shoulders to those of the team members by putting in place the expectations and a performance assessment system before the project starts. This way, the team members can determine for themselves how they are doing without having to wait to hear it from the project manager.

Then conduct assessments (report cards) on a regular schedule during the life of the project. This way, the team members can decide for themselves whether they want to achieve the project’s “honour roll” or just get by so the project manager doesn’t “ground them”.

Prepare the Project Member

There are a few simple things that can prepare the team member to become as effective as possible on your project team. This assumes, of course, the project manager has already determined they are qualified to become a project team member.

1. Each team member should receive a brief measurable and documented orientation.

This gives the project manager assurance each member clearly understands the project’s mission; the project manager’s expectations of them; what they can expect from the project manager; the performance assessment system; and the frequency of performance assessment periods “the report card grading period - every six weeks.”

Also, access badges or any other unique requirements or equipment can be issued at this time.
2. There should be a project "kick-off" meeting that not only discusses the purpose, nature, and expectations of the project but also a review of the teamwork expectations of each other.

Prepare the Project Manager

There are at least three things the project manager should do as an on-going practice leading the team that are not associated with any specifics of a particular project. These deal with fundamental human motivation and morale.

1. Make sure you have had this communication with each of your direct reports on the project team on a regular basis. Insist that they do the same with theirs:

   1. You can identify at least two project-related strengths and "opportunities for improvement" (we don't like to hear about our weaknesses) for each direct report and communicate that to them. We like to hear about what we do well so we can keep doing it and what we need to do better so we can be praised.
   2. You can identify two or three non-budgetary rewards that have value for each team member. Then you can give them these rewards when they exceed your expectations. They are getting what they want and you are getting what you want!
   3. You and they are in regular agreement, during weekly project meetings is a good opportunity, on the rank order priorities of the top three things they are paid to do. Since priorities may change within a project due to unforeseen circumstances, this will assure you and them that they are not wasting time on tasks no longer important.

2. You have identified to your satisfaction the limits of authority and responsibility you would be willing to shift from you to your direct reports and you have told them to remind you if you violate this.

The hardest thing about delegation for many project managers is keeping their hands off delegated tasks. Naturally, the project manager is ultimately responsible for the project and it is very tempting to take back something delegated if it looks as though the project may be impacted adversely. But if you have done a good job of preparing the project environment and selecting team members, they will be able to deliver the project for you. Remember, as long as they give you the results you want, you don't have to also control how they get the results. Give them a chance to be creative and try doing things a little differently. If they come up with innovations that will save you time and money, don't you get the credit?

3. You have regular discussions with your direct reports about problems or threats facing the project and asked for their suggestions on dealing with them while sharing your perspective with them.

This gives you the opportunity to spot future "high potentials" and allows them a peek at the world through your eyes. Each side can learn something useful about the other and when it comes to problem solving, none of us is as smart as all of us.

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