Building Successful Teams

Marc Elpel, December 23, 2006

'Team building' is a broad field and as you have probably already noticed there are many resources available around the web for team exercises, individual and team profiling, and team communications. So why write yet another…? From managing many projects and working with other managers to optimize project development, we have identified a clear gap in the team building process. All of the resources we have encountered discuss team building from the perspective of starting with a predefined group, and working to make this group function as a 'team'. While developing the team interaction is important, prior to this we have a key opportunity to address the likelihood of success for the project by implementing a more pro-active approach to the team assembly process.

In the following sections we will address several proactive steps for managers to increase their project's probability of success. These key topics include Process Assessment, Sizing up the Team, Employee Types, and Team Opportunities.

Getting started lets assume you are given a project, and like most projects management would like it done as soon as possible. You've sized up the project, and know the skills required to complete the task. Having managed projects before you may even have a rough idea of how many people it will take, and approximately how long the project will run. Now all you need is your team, plan detailing, and execution…? With any project success requires understanding and addressing the risks. While most managers assess the technical risks, few address the project risks associated with teams, process, and execution.

Process Assessment

The focus of this article is "Effective Teams", but we will start by addressing process risk as a team without process will fail to be effective. ***As a general rule the project duration will double if the development process is not already in place.*** Small projects are relatively simple, so the process needed is also less complex. Larger projects require more group interaction, and poor process will lead to confusion and in some cases a house of cards that can never be completed. You will have two options – Work with what is there (or not there) for company process, or develop the process and project in parallel. A third option – delaying project start until process is in place, is generally not a feasible option to upper management.

If you are not working for a start up, historical performance will be your best reference for company process. You should seek answers to:

- What were the last three projects? How long did these projects take?

- Were the projects on schedule or behind (projects are rarely ahead of schedule…)?

- What was the quality of the product produced (including all elements from documentation through physical product and customer service)?

- Was the process used a company standard, or was it the result of a project manager pulling this together?

As you start a project understanding the quality of the existing process provides one piece of information necessary to scale the development estimates toward realistic values. If the company process is weak, expect to spend more time redoing work, or training employees on process, and thereby extending the project development schedules. The ideal solution is to resolve process issues prior to development, but

process (within product companies) does not bring in revenue and often takes a secondary position to product development.

As a project manager with this situation you may attempt to address process issues piecewise – taking on only those process steps directly associated with a specific development cycle. As the project progresses you continue to refine the process steps for the next stage of development. While this can help with the development flow, some rework may be required as individuals will be working blind to future stage requirements, and earlier work may therefore be inconsistent and require alterations.

Sizing up the Team

Most team building resources go straight to activities and attributes for good team interaction. The fundamental assumption in this approach is that you have the right people and skills, and it is now your job as a manager to pull this group into an effective team. It is an unfortunate reality that in many organizations resources are thought of as equal, and projects that ask for two of the first type, and three of the next, get equal quality as the resources. In order to ask for resources the project manager must already have made rough estimates of needs and schedule, but these estimates are based on prior experience or average performance, and reality will always vary.

When you get all the strong players, or even the experienced players, building a team is easy. So the question to start is "Do you have all the right players?" This is an area that begins to become politically sensitive as you will need to apply your judgment in advance as to whether these individuals will be successful in the project. What about giving them a chance? What about the manager's responsibility to build a successful environment and team structure? How about developing the employee?

One manager stated "It is the manager's responsibility to make their employees successful". That may be a giant request, and in attempting to fulfill this for the few challenging employees the manager is likely to over-allocate time to the weakest individuals while under managing the remainder of the team. We can instead alter the responsibility to "It is the manager's responsibility to provide an environment in which the employees can succeed", we adjust the task to something the manager can control (the environment), rather than the employees performance within that environment.

A venture capitalist speaking to a Stanford class ("Starting up Start-Ups") stated his rules for a successful company and project staff. His first rule – "Fire 10% of the people you hire." While harsh, the rule was based on market numbers – When hiring people you will never be 100% successful at filtering employees during the interview, and keeping 100% is fooling yourself as to your interviewing and hiring skills. A secondary benefit from this is the clear statement that the company is committed to being successful and providing a team of strong players to do so. This benefits the strongest producers, as well as clearly identifying the consequences for the weaker ones. Of importance to this section (Sizing up the Team) is the fact that not all employees you will get to work on your project will be successful *on this project*. Some of these employees have real value, but not on this project(possible mismatch in skill set, personality, or goals). Other employees will not be particularly successful on any project but are still getting by within the corporate environment. In either situation it is in the best interest of the project manager to understand where the strengths and weaknesses are, and make adjustments as soon as possible. If put in an environment where projects have previously been challenging: There is a saying regarding doing the same thing, with the same resources, and expecting a different result….

Using the philosophy from the Process Assessment section that history defines the likely future outcomes, we need to ask:

- How did these employees perform in the past?

- What project or environmental factors determined whether their previous tasks were successful or not?

- How does this employee perform relative to others in the same roll?

- Does this employee have the skills, or can they get the skills needed to be successful in the new project?

- Given a structured project what is the likelihood this employee will succeed?

In particular the last question is one that stirs a company as you are making a future assessment of an employee's performance – How can this be fair? As a project manager, it is your task to identify and mitigate risks to deliver a project to schedule. By asking the previous questions (due diligence), you are assembling the facts you need to identify the schedule risks associated with project staffing. Armed with this information you have multiple options for mitigating the risks:

- In some situations you may simply have an option of getting other resources internally.

- You may have an option of going external (contractors) to fill the voids.

- If these resources are to remain on the project, you may need to adjust schedule estimates to reflect the lower productivity of the individuals.

- Lastly, while stating an employee is "bad" is not politically correct, outlining your situational assessment to management based on facts allows them to take responsibility for the item (after you've exhausted the options within you scope of influence). In this case you would point out:

    "On the last three projects the company has had problems in this particular area/ discipline, and we noted that the development in this area was behind schedule on items X, Y, and Z. If this were to occur again we would expect a similar project delay at a cost of {X^1} dollars to our company. I would like your help in mitigating this project risk."

    Upper management now has the same information you have, including your assessment of the facts, and can make the decision to address the risk or allow it to continue. Capturing and distributing meeting minutes can then emphasize the resolution (or lack of) on the particular issue.

From personal experience most managers will not address personnel resourcing issues at the start of the project, but will instead start with the assumption that all resources are adequate. Later when the project starts to have difficulties and schedules begin to slip, the manager will attempt to react to the 'new' situation. At this point it is already too late. Take for example a two year technical project. After a year an area of the project is identified as falling behind a few months, and the need for additional resources has been identified. Assuming this ideal company immediately approves bringing in another resource, that resource must be found, paperwork established prior to starting, his tools put in place for the task, and trained on the task specifics. If we were already 3 months behind when we identified the problem, we are now likely six months behind by the time our new resource is fully functional.

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[1] There is a book "Developing Products in Half the Time: New Rules, New Tools, 2nd Edition" by Preston G. Smith and Donald G. Reinertsen which does an excellent job addressing the true costs of decisions and project delays. By developing a quantifiable method of assigning costs, a uniform method of evaluating alternatives can be applied. By knowing the cost per day of delay (this is the market value of the new product, not the development resource cost), managers can make a direct assessment of the cost-benefit tradeoffs associated with applying resources to address issues.

'Sizing up the Team' means understanding the schedule risks as a function of human resources as soon as possible, rather than waiting for problems and then reacting. This proactive approach to team resources is one of the largest potential project risk reductions that can be done early in the development cycle.

Employee Types

There are many ways of evaluating and classifying employees, and often professional team building consultants will start with employee surveys as a backdrop to team understanding and team building. The thought is that all employee types add value, but the way the value is added, and the ideal method of interacting with these employees will be different. While these methods of classification are valuable, they are also well documented so rehashing them here would add little value. If interested, a web search on "Employee Personality Types" will provide several days reading.

Rather than use the standard categories, I'll propose some alternate categories that are more directly related to employee's motivations within a project.

- **Goal Focused** – In general the goal focused employees are the easy ones (in terms of work), but may be more challenging from a group interaction standpoint. These employees take pride in their work, and are motivated to get their tasks complete. Once given a project the goal focused employee takes limited supervision as their motivation (completing the task) is generally in alignment with that of the project manager. Where these employees have the biggest challenge is between projects, or even late in the project when tasks change from being a large clearly defined goal to multiple small independent tasks needed for project "close out" work. They are also motivated by the work, and not necessarily the team dynamics. While this benefits this individuals contribution, it may have a negative impact on other types of employees.

- **Hourly** – Hourly employee mentality applies to those that come to work to put in the eight hours, but are not particularly motivated by what they are working on. Note that the name, the "Hourly Employee" reflects a work mentality, not necessarily a pay structure. Where as a goal oriented employee will work an extra hour or more to finish a task, the hourly employee knows the task will be there the next day and therefore closes out his shift after the hours are done. Typically their attitude is more of just wanting to be told what they need to do, then they can deliver against the predefined direction. While the motivation is different from the goal focused employee, the hourly employee can also be strong contributors to a project. If recognized for these characteristics these employees can add value by providing the regular day to day process and progress needed to clock through a large task.

- **Social / Attention Driven** – The social employee is motivated by the interaction with other team members and management. The project becomes a source of social satisfaction, and working on the project is a method of being in this social environment. Like the hourly employee the social one can be a regular contributor, but is likely to want to be in a system where their tasks are predefined and they work against a process. These employees need a lot of attention which will come either through socializing with those around them, or in repeated meetings with management for input or confirmation of their work. Given a truly independent task they are less likely to succeed. Working on a group synergistic project they will bring their social energy and can help build a larger team work environment via their social skills.

Team Opportunities

Once you have verified the company has the 'how' (the process), and the 'who' (the resources), the project manager can begin to address the team optimization issues. From this point the manager has within their scope the ability to pull the team together for a common goal based around "what' (the project), 'why' (the company goals), and 'when' (schedule).

Many team building firms offer offsite events to encourage interaction within a group. The activities are generally abstract (nothing to do with the employee's daily activities), and are generally designed to be light and fun. These activities are designed to try to pull all members together, and to provide a seed for communications to begin. The general philosophy is by better understanding the people on the team, and having a positive common experience, the opportunity for better project communications is provided.

Some specific areas a manager can address to foster communications on a regular basis include:

- **Team Lunches** – Many companies mistakenly see this as an 'expense', yet in reality it is some of the least expensive employee time! A one hour lunch meeting (catered) may cost $6-10 per person, yet these employees are working (or at least team building) for an extra hour. Team lunches provide an opportunity for the casual conversation to foster group interaction, as well as the extra work time. A balance if these ranging from 30-50% socializing can be a highly effective team interaction tool.

- **Employee Empowerment** – For many employees empowerment allows them to feel in control of their destiny, and motivates them to higher productivity. As stated previously though in the alternative personality types (see Employee Types), empowerment is not for everyone. Goal oriented employees will thrive under empowerment, but hourly or social may not. Hourly or social employees are not necessarily motivated by the 'American Dream' of success within a corporation, so allowing them to do more may be more of a burden than opportunity. It is fair to say the opposite though – Micro-management stifles personal motivation. Even for the social employee, while some attention may be welcomed, attention in the form of micro-management projects a lack of confidence in the employees ability.

- **Seating Arrangements** – As with real-estate - Location, location, location…. As simple as it seems, even slight separations in seating can have a big impact on group interactions. Cubicles with close seating provide for the osmosis effect – Your brain processes the information around you whether you 'hear it' or not. People are creatures of habit and settle in to their 'home' at the office. Given any moderate distance between employees and interactions quickly change from routine informal conversations to email interaction, or meetings… each of which is much less effective.

- **Near Term Goals** – Most projects take an extended period to complete, whether this means months, or even years. With goals too far in the future employees are unlikely to put much value on them, and therefore will not strive as hard to meet them. By offering near term goals employees are encouraged to put in the extra effort so the team can succeed in making a visible milestone. Team accountability can be a strong driver in motivating others – the employees can feel responsible to the team rather than management for their portion of the project. Nobody wants to be the one to drop the ball on the final play, so employees will strive to stay up or ahead of the team.

- **Sharing Successes** – Finally sharing the successes of the team instills an environment with forward momentum. All of the employees can see how the project is moving forward, and how

they are a piece of something much bigger than themselves. Like with Near Term Goals, sharing success helps instill a sense of forward movement and urgency in moving forward.

The goal of all of these team activities is to promote positive communications and common sense of purpose. By rallying the team behind the project and having all members committed to the project success, we ensure the best productivity from the team as a whole.

Summary

There are many opportunities for the project manager to build successful teams, some of which can have a profound effect on project predictability, yet are often missed. A proactive a manager has an opportunity to increase the project's probability of success before the team even starts by identifying risks associated with process and employee historical performance and putting alternative plans in motion.

Once the process and employees are in place, understanding the employee types can help provide insights in how best to guide the employees through the project process. Employees are motivated by different factors and providing the optimal motivation may be within the manager's realm. And lastly, providing opportunities for employees to interact and develop as a team can foster personal commitment to the team's success. Some (of many) simply techniques were provided to help guide the team toward a common sense of achievement.