Reading 2.4

Making the team

Gordon Smith outlines the role of team building and team leadership in successful project management

Being in a team has become an inescapable feature of modern life. We are all, you might say, 'team players now'. In the work context, the received wisdom is that teamwork delivers real organisational benefits, improving productivity, enhancing employee satisfaction and reducing absenteeism.

In the wider world, teams have a clear, highly positive image, embracing the likes of sporting teams such as Manchester United, the British and Irish Lions, or maybe a symphony orchestra. A place in such teams confers clear status, a place in the sun—you compete to get into the team, and you have to perform consistently well if you want to keep your place. When it comes to work-based project teams, things are a little different. My own research with project managers suggests a team selection process more reminiscent of schoolchildren picking a football team at break time (Who wants the nerdy weakling then?). In reality, project managers don’t get to choose—they take what they can get.

Other differences between the likes of a sports team and a project team are evident in the role and power of the manager and the importance of practice. A sports team is managed by someone external to the team, e.g. the club coach. An orchestra is managed by a conductor. These individuals are the arbiters of standards and their decisions are final. Project managers have to operate in a more complex managerial environment, which, inevitably limits their power and discretion. Also, a sports team is given time to practise, and an orchestra to rehearse; project teams are, somehow, expected to gel and perform from day one.

Clearly, different teams work in radically dissimilar environments, although it can be argued that it is the project team environment that is the most complex to analyse, as each project is unique and the conditions for team selection and motivation are often less than ideal. All this implies an overwhelming case for giving more attention to the art and science of project team building.

A variety of factors are involved in building high-performing teams, including the contributions made by individual members, leadership, communications and internal power relationships. Each of these will have an effect on whether or not your team performs successfully.
Table 1 Belbin’s roles—their strengths and weaknesses

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<tr>
<th>Preferred role</th>
<th>Contribution</th>
<th>Allowable weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plant</td>
<td>creative, imaginative, unorthodox, solves difficult problems</td>
<td>ignores details, often too preoccupied to communicate effectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource investigator</td>
<td>extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative, explores opportunities, develops contacts</td>
<td>overoptimistic, loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-ordinator</td>
<td>mature, confident, a good chairperson, clarifies goals, promotes decision making and delegates well</td>
<td>can be seen as manipulative, delegates personal work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shaper</td>
<td>challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure, has the drive and courage to overcome obstacles</td>
<td>can provoke others, hurts other people’s feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor evaluator</td>
<td>sober, strategic and discerning, sees all options, judges accurately</td>
<td>lacks drive and the ability to inspire others, overly critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team-worker</td>
<td>co-operative, mild, perceptive and diplomatic, listens, builds, averts friction and calms the waters</td>
<td>indecisive in crunch situations, can be easily influenced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementer</td>
<td>disciplined, reliable, conservative and efficient, turns ideas into practical actions</td>
<td>somewhat inflexible, slow to respond to new possibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completer/finisher</td>
<td>painstaking, conscientious, anxious, searches out errors and omissions, delivers on time</td>
<td>Inclined to worry unduly, reluctant to delegate, can be a nit picker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>single minded, self starting, dedicated, provides knowledge or skills that are in short supply</td>
<td>contributes on only a narrow front, dwells on technicalities, overlooks the big picture</td>
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The power of nine

Team building is a, more or less, obligatory module on every management course—commonly taught with reference to the work of Meredith Belbin. According to Belbin, the characteristics of individual team members can be categorised by a combination of nine distinct roles. These comprise: ‘plant’, ‘resource investigator’, ‘co-ordinator’, ‘shaper’, ‘monitor evaluator’, ‘team worker’ ‘implementer’, ‘completer/finisher’ and ‘specialist’. Table 1 indicates Belbin’s assessment of the distinct contribution and allowable weaknesses of each role type.

Belbin provides a valuable perspective on team composition. Project managers need to know whether their team contains a good balance between the different roles, or whether there are particular combinations of roles that can lead to conflict and non-performance.

Plants need a champion, a backer—they want to feel valued. They work well with co-ordinators, and can also thrive where a team worker is the project manager. Shapers and implementers are unlikely to have a great deal of success managing plants; and, given that Belbin identifies these roles as the most likely to reach senior levels in organisations, this effectively places a glass ceiling on the plant’s career progression. On the positive side, plants make stimulating colleagues, and work well with the ‘sociable’ roles such as team workers, co-ordinators and resource investigators. But warning bells should sound when plants and resource investigators are paired. Their values and basic aims have little in common and their methods of working lead to conflict if not open war. Paradoxically, a plant-implementer/chief-subordinate relationship can be highly effective—provided it can become established. How many times have you heard the remark: ‘He’s a pretty good ideas man, but needs someone to
follow up on the detail? The plant-monitor evaluator relationship can also be very successful, with the monitor evaluator occupying the role of devil’s advocate.

In any project team there are bound to be some individuals who see their input as being very closely defined. These are the specialists who, more than any other role, are defined by their jobs, both professionally and personally. So what do specialists need to perform well? First, their boss must believe in their professionalism; secondly, they should have a relatively free hand when it comes to matters they see as being in their domain, and finally, they should be free from interference by meddling colleagues who don’t understand the situation. As a consequence, specialists like working with team workers and co-ordinators, but don’t get on with the likes of resource investigators and shapers, who are inclined to present their views in a forward and highly assertive manner. Specialists tend to resent such behaviour, and this can lead to demarcation lines becoming established, adversely impacting project performance.

Every project needs a completer/finisher—often seen as ‘the detail people’, rather than dynamic go-getters. Completer/finishers make good subordinates for resource investigators, plants and shapers. They do not, unfortunately, tend to work well with their own kind. The familiar complaint: ‘Either he wants me to do it or he wants to do it himself. And if he wants to do it, why I am here?’, typifies the problems of completer/finisher interworking.

Resource investigators are the project fixers, sociable, tolerant, and not too bothered who they work with.

Shapers are thrusting, gung-ho, take-no-prisoners, get-the-job-done types. Their subordinates need to be chosen with care, and team workers are probably best able to handle the shaper’s management style. The lower-profile monitor evaluators would be seen as too slow by the shapers of this world.

Analysis is always useful, but it’s far from being the whole story. Having analysed your team and found it to have more plants than a garden centre, more specialists than a hospital and more monitors than a school, you now need to be able to pull it all together, and complete on time and on budget. The vital extra ingredient that will ensure the realisation of this goal is effective leadership.

The three-fold way
Is your leadership style laissez-faire, transactional or transformational? Writing in the Journal of Leadership Studies, Gill et al., closely identify the laissez-faire approach—more of a non-leadership style—with bureaucracies. Such organisations, it is argued, are characterised by don’t-care managers, and business processes that are simplified to the point where creativity, inspiration, help and support become, effectively, redundant. Under such circumstances, many of the defining features of a successful team would appear to have little meaning or value. Team membership does not confer status, nobody competes to join the team or to retain their place, and the team certainly isn’t managed by a strong...
external party, free to set standards and make decisions.

Given such a situation, it's reasonable to ask whether you have a team at all. You certainly haven't got a learning organisation, and maybe your project's in deep trouble. (But, expressed in the best tradition of laissez-faire management: Who cares?) Maybe a bureaucracy is not the place to undertake projects, while such projects as are undertaken would appear to have little chance of being delivered on time and on budget.

Transactional leaders, on the other hand, are the carrot and stick types, the individuals that set performance targets, monitor and enforce rules, regulations and procedures. The risk of such an approach—which echoes the rigidity of Frederick Taylor's mechanistic management theories—is that it can inhibit initiative. Project team members are at risk of developing a mindset characterised by: 'If I do nothing, then I'll have done nothing wrong'. As a consequence, risk taking and empowerment will be absent, people will not perform at their full potential, and an organisation will be unable to learn from its mistakes.

The relevance of transactional leadership for today's complex project environments is being increasingly questioned—by notably on the grounds that in a post-

bureaucratic/post-industrial society the vertical hierarchies of bureaucracy and industrialism are being replaced by horizontally organised networks of power and influence. In tomorrow's brave new world, it is argued, a new organisational culture characterised by teams, networking, empowerment and calculated risk taking will replace a rapidly vanishing era of rigid hierarchies and misplaced certainties. The advocates of this view maintain that we now need to develop a transformational management style, distinguished by a concern with identifying and supporting the individual's unique needs and abilities. Transformational leaders stimulate the intellect and imagination of their followers, and inspire by articulating and communicating their vision of the new world. In this new organisational paradigm, the predominating characteristics are empowerment of the worker, a shift in emphasis from management to leadership, and the importance of vision and scenario thinking—all vital aspects of project management.

Change, not decay

Finally, we need to recognise that there is no such thing as the 'dream team' that fits all situations, so keeping the same team members throughout the life of a project may not be the optimum solution. As projects evolve, particularly as completion approaches, the appropriate skill set of the team will change. A high proportion of plants can be extremely beneficial at the early stages of a project's development, but less of a good idea when the need for idea generation has long passed. Whilst being part of a team gives an individual their place in the sun, sometimes your responsibilities as project manager mean that you just have to 'let people go'. Like a good football manager, you have play your part as an effective leader, making those vital substitutions that, throughout the project lifecycle, will keep your project on track and poised for ultimate success.

References

1 BELBIN, M.: 'Team Roles at Work' (Butterworth Heinemann, 1993)

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