

Taking a Good Team and Making It Great

Lisa Cawley

As project managers, we are generally provided the opportunity and the complete responsibility for delivery of a project. We often do not have input in the selection of our team members, nor do we have any administrative authority over them. So, given this reality, how can we take a sometimes disparate, more often over allocated group and turn it into a highly self-motivated team?

Many projects represent challenges and learning experiences so team members are ready to dive in at the beginning. When team members become unfocused (the goal is not reinforced and secondary issues divert attention away from it), their drive for achieving milestones and attention to details begins to wane. Deliverables and quality of work begin to slide, which causes rework, schedule and cost impacts, in addition to unwanted additional stress on the project manager!

Your role, as a leader, is to reinforce the project goals. Encouraging people to be their best sustains self-motivation of team members. Your expectations about quality need to be shared by the team members producing the products. The team's overall goals should include not only getting the job done, but getting it done *right the first time*.

Everyone wants to have a team that exceeds expectations, freely points out issues and offers innovative and well thought out solutions over the course of the *entire* project. This is where the project manager plays a vital role. You, along with your team, should set your goals regarding expectations to ensure that no one on the team is a "passenger." Setting these types of quality goals ensure a project team that offers options to solving problems.

Start Off Right

The project kickoff is one of the most important components of the entire project. The kickoff sets the stage; it should provide the team with a clear understanding of the initiative's goals and objectives, their importance to the project AND how it supports the strategic business objectives of the organization.

The sponsor is a critical component of the kickoff meeting. If this individual is missing in action then the perception will naturally be "this is not very important." Team morale can be quickly sabotaged at the initiation of the project. It is our responsibility, as project managers and team leaders to ensure that this does not happen. We occasionally have to coach the sponsor, not just our team members. The success of the sponsor is dependent on your success and your team's success. *Ensure they are fully engaged from project inception*. This engagement must be visible throughout the life of the project because the sponsor is the person that has accountability for the results.

Keep the Momentum Going

Changes to the project team are inevitable. Some move off the project and some are added, but we generally do not think about helping the new person get acclimated to the routines, expectations and goals or even the project's nomenclature.

When new team members are brought on board, it is our job to help them ramp up quickly. This helps them feel like contributors, keeps the project momentum going and builds a speedy integration into the project team. Have you thought about having a small orientation package for new team members? We are generally so focused on our projects that we lose sight of the reality of new team members.

There are many sources for orientation packages, from kickoff meeting materials to a glossary of the project nomenclature. One of the best sources in terms of “orientation” is you...no one should know more about the project than you! Spend time supporting new team members; they are “jumping in” where someone else may have left off. Remember, your success depends on them being successful and you can foster their success by meeting with them individually. This level of support generally leads to trust, which is an essential ingredient to open communication.

Know Your Team

I’ve always said that projects are about people. They may deliver results (products, services, witjits, etc.), but there is no delivery without the people. Knowing your team becomes one of your assets!

Your project team most likely consists of people with very different backgrounds, personalities and motivations. A junior analyst on your team may want to become a better analyst or the next great project manager, but the business partner may be trying to save his career. As your project ramps up, you should begin to develop relationships with your team and uncover what motivates them by asking, “What’s in it for you?” If you genuinely show an interest in getting to know your team, and in helping them reach their goals, they will be much more likely to act in a way that benefits you, the team and the project.

Everyone has unique motivations, unique ways of working and unique sets of issues. When someone asks, “I wonder what’s wrong with him/her,” you should find out. This is not a time to be nosey; this is a time to be supportive. We have all been on stressful projects where a team member may be going through challenging personal issues. Do not assume that someone is not being “cooperative.” Give them the opportunity to succeed with support.

Another aspect of knowing your team is to understand how they work best. Some people prefer to work in areas where they are the recognized “subject matter experts.” Others want to work on the innovative, “fun stuff.” Some people like things to be “black and white,” others are more comfortable with turning the gray to black and white. Keep in mind, even though project managers and team members are all about driving change via our various projects, *most people do not embrace change!*

Team Spirit

So, you’ve started developing relationships with your team members, how do you maintain a high level of interest, self-motivation and “team spirit” throughout the duration of the project? In my experience, all it takes is some simple recognition.

I was the Program Manager on an 18 month international initiative with a Fortune 500 client. One of the projects was moving forward as expected, however, there was a sense of resistance and negativity surrounding the team. It was obvious that I had to utilize my leadership to influence this resistance or the project would be significantly and negatively impacted. My solution? I started a monthly “Most Valuable Team Player Award” (MVTP) which got the results I needed as well as some pleasant surprises.

At the end of each month, I selected a team member that I believed had gone above and beyond the call of duty and acknowledged that person in the PMO status report that was distributed to the entire project team. I also presented the MVTP with a small pin. As project managers, we can influence our team members directly by these small recognitions, but also indirectly with input/feedback to their administrative managers when someone has “exceeded” expectations.

How did the MVTP award turn the negative attitudes around and get the team motivated?

It was an opportunity for the team members, including business partners, other project managers, team leads, technology partners and support staff to be recognized in front of their peers as well as senior leadership.

As with all competitions, once you start keeping score, the game changes. After the first MVTP award was given out, the business partners associated with the projects begin to engage in a friendly rivalry. Business partners and other team members began to increase participation and become fully engaged in the project and attitudes were much more positive. The entire project team became more motivated. Due to the competitive environment, quality and performance increased dramatically. What was intended to be a very lighthearted competition resulted in bringing the team closer, and we shared some great laughs. In the end, the difficult project milestones seemed to happen with less effort.

Through the MVTP award, I realized that acknowledging and empowering ancillary team members can have powerful results. These team members, though not part of the core team, are essential to project success and by developing a relationship with them, a win-win situation is produced. Not only do they feel appreciated and part of the team, they are willing to support you in your current and future project roles. One year after I moved on from this program, I continue to foster the relationships built with this simple recognition.

Communication + Connection = Cooperation

In my experience, communicating and connecting with people solidifies relationships and fosters support and cooperation. Being “in touch” with your team cultivates the good team into becoming a great team. Remember, projects are about people! Your people skills will build the personal connections that last long after the project has ended.

Lisa Cawley is a Program/Project Manager responsible for driving major business change initiatives for Fortune 1000 clients. She has over 16 years of experience working in various key roles (team member and leader of projects).

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