

The Behavioral Side of Project Team Effectiveness

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Project Management is a Team Activity

Project teams have two universal measures; to satisfy the customer, and to deliver on time, on budget and on spec. The rationale for using teams is simple, high performing teams save money and satisfy customers. Unfortunately there is the other side of the coin, poor performing teams cost money and disappoint customers.

If project teams are such a good idea, why are 53% of all projects late, over budget and/or do not meet the project requirements? [1] We have the technology and knowledge to plan and execute projects; the project plans are elegant, the individual project team members are 'the best', and the project management tools are sophisticated. Apparently, we're missing something.

In an effort to better understand this, we have tried many different tools, but the most revealing has been a simple activity we use whenever we work with a project team.

We ask a simple question, "From your experience, what are the things that cause your team to derail"? We record the list on a flip chart and then ask the team members to divide the list into two realms, the 'operational/functional' realm and the 'behavioral' realm. Invariably, the behavioral realm outweighs the operational/functional realm. This predictable outcome is supported by numerous sources, both within and outside the project community.

- In the popular business book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni [2], four of the five dysfunctions are behavioral.
- The Knowledge Team Effectiveness Profile (KTEP) statistically identified seventeen discriminators of team effectiveness by comparing highly effective teams to less effective teams [3]. The top seven discriminators are behavioral.
- The Agile Alliance, the hub of Agile Software Development, identified four key values. Three of the four are behavioral. [4].

These are three diverse sources, they all say the same thing...behavior is the key.

We Talk about the Behavioral, We Act on the Operational

Project management involves the application of a set of tools to carry a team from chartering through successful implementation and evaluation. In my many years helping project teams in a variety of industries and applications move to high performance, I have found that most experienced project managers can draw on their technical tool kit very well. However, where project managers seem to have the most difficulty is around the relationship/behavioral side of team performance. Unfortunately for project managers with this unbalanced skill set, the KTEP research indicates that the greatest discriminators between high performing teams and low performing teams lie in the behavioral areas of:

- Trust
- Cooperation
- Knowledge Sharing
- Inspirational Leadership

Generally, we do not address these until the team derails. Then we react and lose time and productivity.



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Typically, organizations put a cross-functional group of people together, call them a team, and jump right into the work of the team. Rarely do they address the relationship of team members and the behavioral capacity of the team as part of the team launch. Addressing the relationship side of project team performance proactively at team launch, is much more effective than trying to address it reactively after open conflict, bruised egos, backstabbing, and hurt feelings interfere with project team productivity Or completely derail the team.

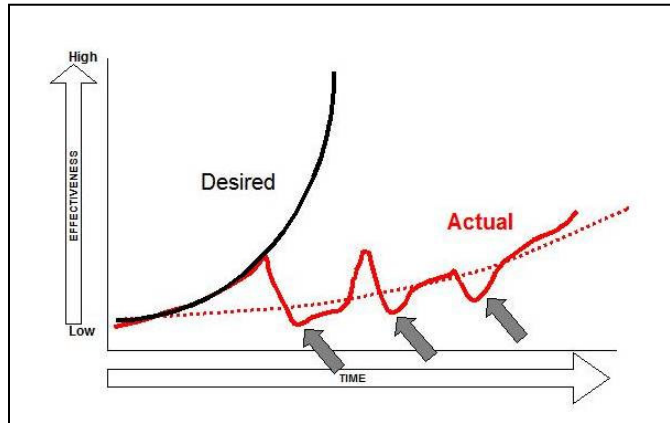


Exhibit 1: Team Development Curve

When we form a team we always hope, and often depend on the hope that it will become a high performing team, rapidly. We are frequently disappointed. When we look at the actual development curve of a team contrasted with the desired curve, we notice that it has many peaks and valleys. [Figure 1] A behavioral or relationship issue usually causes the valleys. When something goes awry, we generally throw some training or some type of team building event at it to solve the problem. This is a band-aid approach; it treats the symptoms, not the cause. We get a short-term spike in performance but things usually fall back down into a valley.

When behavioral issues and relationships are not understood, the team becomes mired in conflict and the team loses momentum, resulting in lost time and effectiveness. Productivity stealers include:

- Inability to work together towards a common goal
- Fear of sharing ideas
- Fear of negative feedback
- Self interest driving actions
- Expectation that the team leader will solve all of the problems and assume all of the responsibility
- Confusion between individual tasks and relationships with other people
- Lack of appropriate acknowledgement for accomplishments.

It's Not How You Do the Work; It's How You Do the Work *Together*

When a project team aligns its behaviors with its tasks, the time it takes to achieve effectiveness and productivity is dramatically accelerated, improving throughput and decreasing the cost of doing business. When behavioral interference is identified and eliminated, problem solving, decision-making, brainstorming and communication activities become rapid, predictable and permanent.

This concept makes perfect sense intellectually, but it is applied far too infrequently. However, the relationship side of team performance has been given a “bad rap” (in many cases justifiably so) because of its lack of clarity and seeming imprecision. As many of our clients have put it, team development is seen as “singing Kum Ba Yah and holding hands.” One client put it even more bluntly, “We don’t have time for that ****. We have work to do.” Apparently, she didn’t see the value of behavioral balance—at least not at first.

What is needed is a methodology to manage team behavior with the same precision and integrity as the methodology to manage the technical project management process. So, how do we obtain that balance between the technical side and the human side of project performance—without falling into the “touchy feely” realm?

It’s really a balancing act between the ‘operational/functional’ realm and the ‘behavioral’ realm. There is a tendency for a team to prefer one realm over the other. Project teams, for the most part, lean toward the ‘operational/functional’ realm. In contrast, sales teams for example, lean toward the ‘behavioral’ realm. In either case, the team is out of balance. High performing teams are those that are able to maintain the balance. When we watch a tight rope walker, we readily notice that the balance pole is even and centered. If the balance pole starts wobbling or goes too high above either side of the tight rope walker, there’s trouble ahead. The same is true for project managers.

Project managers have often said to me that the process side of a project is manageable because it is visible, understandable, and measurable—it is easy to see. The process side is easy to see because they know what it looks like. With today’s technology, the relationship side is just as visible and measurable.

In our consulting practice, we have found that most project team members prefer an empirical and analytical approach to understanding the world around them. To match this preference, we use Axiom Software’s discUS® suite to analyze team behavior because of its graphic quality, analytical structure, and ease of understanding. The basic DISC behavioral model, the basis for the Axiom suite has been around for 75 years. Traditionally, behavioral instruments like DISC have focused primarily on the individual. This new technology has enabled us to raise behavioral understanding to a much higher level. We now have the ability to analyze team behavior, model ‘ideal’ teams and analyze behavioral relationships across multiple combinations of people with the same accuracy as individual analysis. This is essential when we have to manage relationships within the team, with team sponsors, with customer contacts, and with other teams. In a team of 10 people, there are 90 individual relationships, and the effective project manager should understand all of them.

By applying this technology in project teams, the teams have been able to generate a number of unique outputs that have improved bottom-line performance.

Teams have:

- Determined how to leverage the team member relationships based on the behavioral preferences of each of the team members.
- Established ongoing behavioral monitoring tools to address the alignment or misalignment of the team leader’s leadership style compared to the team’s leadership requirements.
- Identified the behavioral issues that will positively or negatively impact the accomplishment of specific upcoming team tasks.
- Determined ways to minimize or eliminate behavioral interference when it arises within the team work process.

- Assigned accountability for behavioral monitoring as the team completes its work.
- Created plans to maintain or improve areas of strength and limitation within their team.
- Established a customer communication strategy based on the behavioral profile of the customer.

The Behavioral Side of Team Development

Team development is an iterative process. This is readily understood when we look at the 'forming-storming-norming-performing' model for team development that has become a standard team development model since Bruce Tuckman introduced it in 1965. [5] The following is a brief description of each phase.

Forming: the phase of anticipation.

The team first comes together with high energy and expectation. There is limited knowledge of the detail of the team at this time.

Storming: the phase of anxiety.

Individuals start jockeying for position and recognition. Questions arise regarding why and how decisions are made that affect 'me'.

Norming: the phase of stabilization.

Goals are established, plans are developed, roles and responsibilities are defined.

Performing: the phase of application.

Plans are implemented, outputs are generated. The work gets done.

Whenever something impacts the team i.e. the introduction of a new team member or team leader, a change in focus or plan, or a change in the organization that affects the team, the team has to reform, a Re-forming phase. Teams, by nature, are not stable; they continually re-form and begin the team development cycle again....and again, and again.

Every team must go through each phase, whether they like it or not. The problem arises when a team decides to skip over a phase because it doesn't like or value it. The decision to skip a phase is generally not a conscious one, but rather a subconscious rationalization of why some other phase or activity is more important or urgent. In many cases it's as simple as subconscious avoidance. Most people don't flock to take part in an activity they find uncomfortable. Unfortunately, if a team tries to skip a phase, it comes back to haunt it. The storming phase is the phase that many project teams tend to minimize or skip entirely. The storming phase can be contentious, conflict ridden and downright painful. Team members will compete for position and recognition. This is where factions and cliques form and power struggles arise. This phase is behaviorally centered. Teams that lean toward logic and analysis find the 'storming' phase the most uncomfortable and distasteful.

A similar phenomenon occurs in another recognized team development model, the Katzenbach and Smith high performance team development model. Katzenbach and Smith identified the pseudo-teaming phase. [6] Pseudo-teaming is characterized by the team members acting, or pretending to be a team. They say all the right words but their actions and motives are contentious and counterproductive.

In both cases, storming and pseudo-teaming, if a team doesn't work through the phase, it will never get past the phase. Both cases are behaviorally based and the lack of the project manager's understanding of this has been the downfall of many a team before it ever really got going.

Once a project manager understands this phenomenon, s/he can leverage it to build a strong, sustainable and high performing team.

Leveraging Behavioral Styles

Each team member has a unique style. Some prefer high levels of personal interaction, others prefer to work alone. Some prefer to work steadily and methodically, while others prefer to jump in and figure it out as they go. Some prefer data and analysis, some prefer instinct and intuition. Which of these styles is the best? All of them and none of them. Certain behaviors are more appropriate in certain situations, more inappropriate in others.

The effective project manager has the ability to understand both the situation and the appropriate style to match it. The ability to do this is a trainable skill.

The Three Steps to Leveraging Styles

Step one

Accept the reality that any one style is no better than any other style.

It's our own perceptions that assign values like better and worse. Is an analytical person a nit-picker or a master of precision? If I agree with or relate to this person, s/he's probably a master of precision, if I disagree or it rubs me the wrong way, she's probably a nit-picker. It's all a matter of perception.

Step two

Think 'leverage'.

There is a tendency to think of people with styles that oppose our own in negative terms. This is a frequent cause of conflict. When understood, these differences become a tremendous source of synergy.

By understanding the strengths of differing styles, a project manager can deploy team members in situations where they will be most comfortable and have the greatest opportunity to succeed. For example, if the team has to present a milestone review to a panel of sponsors and customers who think in bullet points, it would make sense to select a team member who thinks in bullet points to deliver the presentation. If the presenter was a person who lives in the realm of detail and analysis, s/he'd be doomed to fail...and so would go the team. On the other hand, if detail and analysis is the order of the day, don't send the bullet point person.

When a project manager understands this, the selection decisions become obvious and simple.

Step three

It's about adaptability, not change.

Teams have unique natural styles, as do individuals. The aggregate of the individuals' styles create this unique team identity. Some teams prefer to discuss, other teams prefer to apply. An effective project manager must understand the team's natural style and also the style that's required for a team to be effective in a given situation. The project manager can then help the team adapt to the situation at hand.

The key is to understand that team flexibility is the ability to adapt, not change. Change is permanent and slow, Adaptation is temporary and fast. And that's where you want to be.

When a project manager begins practicing these three steps, s/he will create balance and the team will dramatically accelerate its curve to high performance.

Citations

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