

# The 21<sup>st</sup> Century way of Dealing with Some Issues Related to Project Teams

**Asare Bediako<sup>1</sup> Adams, Lewis Billy Bonsu<sup>2</sup> & Dr. David Ackah<sup>3</sup>**

*Regional Prog. Coordinator<sup>1</sup>, Director<sup>2</sup>, President<sup>3</sup>, Institute of Project Management Professionals (IPMP)<sup>1&3</sup>  
Graduate Entrepreneurship & Business Incubation Centre<sup>2</sup>*

*email: [adams.asare@ipmp-edu.org](mailto:adams.asare@ipmp-edu.org)<sup>1</sup> [createcon@yahoo.com](mailto:createcon@yahoo.com)<sup>2</sup> & [president@ipmp-edu.org](mailto:president@ipmp-edu.org)<sup>3</sup>*

## I. INTRODUCTION

A project can be defined as an activity with a specific goal occupying a specific period of time (Wild, 2002). A project is a finite activity, not only in time, but also in the use of resources. Examples of projects include construction of a bridge, highway, power plant, repair and maintenance of an oil refinery or an air plane; design, development and marketing of a new product, research and development work, etc. A project team is a group of individuals working interdependently to accomplish the project objective (Clements and Gido, 2012). According to Turner, 1993, Successful project management has been found to depend upon the adoption of an appropriate strategy design to ensure:

- *There exists an attitude for success.*
- *The objectives by which success are to be measured are defined.*
- *There is a procedure for achieving objectives.*
- *The environment is supportive.*
- *Adequate and appropriate resources are available*

Also, Turner, 1993, continue to state that, within such a strategy the most appropriate approach, or style, for project management, will normally involve the following:

- *Manage through a structured breakdown, the management system is built around a structured breakdown of the facility delivered by the project into intermediate products or results;*
- *Focus on results, what to achieve, not how to do it; i.e. the deliverables, not the work and people, systems and organizational changes;*
- *Organize a contract between all the parties involved, defining their roles, responsibilities and working relationships;*
- *Adopt a clear and simple management approach*

Project management encompasses the concepts of management and leadership. Although leadership and management research have made distinctions between the two concepts, the project management profession has integrated the two concepts, and project management refers to the leadership and management needed to lead and manage a project. A project manager leads people and manages work processes. There is nothing more important to the success of a project than the people who make up the project team (Newton, 2015). Without good people who possess the knowledge, experience, and motivation to get the job done, all of your other planning will be quickly wasted. Putting together a project team is one of the very first steps of setting up a new project. Without the people to compose a quality team, you won't be able to make very much progress at all into the work that needs to be done. Assembling a good team is important in any phase of business, but it is especially important when managing a project to make sure that the work can get done on time and on budget. The process of acquiring a project team takes place within the executing processes and is concerned with confirming human resource availability and obtaining the personnel needed to complete project assignments. It is complicated by the fact that individuals with different skill sets will be required at different points throughout the project. For example, a software project testing personnel are needed. Consequently, acquiring members for a project continues throughout the executing process group (Newton, 2015).

Issues, according to Cambridge dictionary is a subject or problem that people are thinking and talking about. Having managed several business staff over the years, I can say that we have seen many different personnel and team-related issues. As any experienced leader can attest, expecting a team of people to work together seamlessly from the start of a project to the end is likely unrealistic. Teams are made up of individuals who have their own personalities, feelings, backgrounds and more. Now let's look at some of the critical team related issues that is likely to hinder the smooth progress of projects.

## **II. LACK OF TEAM WORK**

Teamwork is often a crucial part of projects, as it is often necessary for colleagues to work well together, trying their best in any circumstance. Team work means that people will try to cooperate, using their individual skills and providing constructive feedback, despite any personal conflict between individuals.

### **A. Discussion**

Why do some efforts to build team work fail? Why do some organizations seem to be very successful in their team development and other groups cannot get off their ground? The success of projects requires the individual efforts of the project team in working towards a common goal. On most occasions, lack of team work happens as a result of expediency. Managers want to get the work done. They perceive that if people work together it will slow things down. Another reason is because of poor operating strategies and some times, the vision of the team leader and the day-to-day workings of the team are imbalanced.

### **B. Impact**

Teamwork is essential for several reasons. First, without effective knowledge sharing, you become overdependent on a few people. Second, it is more difficult to detect problems if people work in isolation. Third, it is easier to grow skills if there is teamwork. Without teamwork there is little backup if someone leaves or is unable to do his or her work. It takes a substantial amount of time and effort for a new person to get proficient with what someone else has done.

Another reason for teamwork is to prevent unpleasant surprises. Suppose a programmer is working alone. He or she may keep the problems to him- or herself. The programmer does not tell management that he or she will be late with the work. The manager assumes things are fine. Then at the last minute the programmer delivers the surprise bad news to the manager. Not good. It happens all of the time. With teamwork, the two people involved in the work discuss it. From experience, it is more likely that awareness of a problem will spread beyond the two people. Moreover, with two people the problem might have a better chance of being solved.

### **C. Detection**

How do you detect the problem that teamwork is ineffective? First, look at how the work is organized. Do the managers provide opportunities for the employees to share experiences? Are the project meetings just for status? If the answer is affirmative, then you can conclude that there is little joint effort.

Next, observe the staff at work. Do you see many instances of people talking together when you visit? If not, this is another sign of the problem.

Still another symptom of the problem is that the same staffs make the same mistakes again and again. They perpetually underestimate the same work. They often deal with the same issues. There is no learning curve. The lack of communications and joint work inhibit cumulative improvement and the avoiding of the repetition of problems.

### **D. Actions and Prevention**

If you find that people are not working together, it is tempting to analyze the situation to determine why this is happening. But often you don't have time to do this. What is a better approach? Implement joint tasks as soon as possible.

Next, provide for sharing of information and knowledge in meetings. As teamwork gets established, hold some meetings where the staff can discuss the benefits of teamwork. This will reinforce the change, help overcome old, ingrained habits, and move the ownership of the idea to the staff. Obviously, you can prevent this issue by establishing and rewarding joint work from the start.

## **III. TOO MUCH TIME SPENT IN MEETINGS**

We understand that a company can only run well only when everyone is pointed in the same direction and working towards common goals. To meet this end, there would be times when people need to come together to share views and discuss actions and strategies, these are what corporates call meetings. If meetings are managed well, they can prove highly effective in ensuring that everyone understands their roles and responsibilities and knows what needs to be done in order to meet individual, team and company goals.

#### **A. Discussion**

There are still a number of project managers who believe that the solution to everything is meetings. Most of the time, people who are called to these meetings see them as distractions from their 'core jobs' which would not get done unless they stay back late. This is a cause of irritation and stress and can easily snowball into bigger issues. Therefore, it is imperative that too many meetings are avoided and when they are required, they should have a set format, a structured agenda and strict timelines. In addition, only those people who would benefit or can contribute to the meetings should be invited and all arbitrary meetings should be avoided at all costs. Keep the number of meetings to a minimum and ensure that the ones that do take place are efficient, effective and time-bound. The fact is that meetings do eat into actual productive time and are a major cause for distracting people from their normal schedules.

#### **B. Impact**

Too many meetings are a cause of irritation and frustration for the highly productive team members. Meetings bring down productivity and cause resentment, in the minds of those who are called for these meetings, against the leaders or senior person calling the meetings. They see these meetings as an ignoring of their passion and desire to achieve more. When top performers get frustrated and they choose to look for employment elsewhere, your company is the losing party. Such 'smart ones' refuse to waste their time, skills and talents listening to some person or persons who sometimes don't even know what they are talking about – these people want to be 'out there' making things happen and achieving new heights and are extremely impatient and intolerant of sitting around listening to people.

#### **C. Detection**

Measure your meetings. Keep a log of the use of all conference and meeting rooms. Post on the wall of the department the number of person-hours spent in meetings each week. This will raise the level of awareness of the impact of meetings. It will also show that you are serious about controlling meeting time.

#### **D. Actions and Prevention**

The first guideline to distribute is to have people plan meetings better. They should ask what topics and actions are expected of the meeting. Also, have people ask the following three questions.

- What if the meeting were not held? What would happen? Can some other way be found to accomplish the same thing?
- What is the minimum number of people needed in the meeting?
- What if the meeting were deferred for a day or a week?

Convince people that they do not have to be in every meeting. Publish the meeting minute's right after the meeting, and circulate them widely. Another problem in meetings is that a junior person takes the notes from the meeting. They may get things wrong or generate political problems. Here is a tip: If you attend a meeting, always take the notes. Otherwise, have a senior person take the notes.

### **IV. TEAM MEMBERS OR DEPARTMENTS THAT DO NOT GET ALONG WITH EACH OTHER**

Having to deal with team members that don't get along with one another can put a massive downer on your day-to-day work and the team's overall capability, not to mention be completely exhausting to manage! The reality is that team members are dependent on each other for success, so it's important that they establish strong and reliable working relationships with one another, whether they like each other or not. Of course, it helps if they do, so taking into consideration team-fit during the recruitment process is one way you can help avoid negative team dynamics. Unfortunately, these things aren't always easy to predict. Even when you've considered team fit early on and think you've made the perfect hire, any given event can cause conflict within your team between two or more individuals.

#### **A. Discussion**

Some people see themselves in competition with other team members. As such, they do not want to share knowledge. Another factor that contributes to this problem is that through training and culture, the individual is favoured over the group. Also, some organizations have no significant turnover of staff. People come in contact and work with each other over many projects and years. For example, at a university with tenure, the same faculty work

(or do not work) together for decades. In these situations it is not surprising to find personality conflicts and even hatred.

The project leader often has little choice regarding the team's composition. Managers may assign people to the team. A person may have unique skills or knowledge essential to the project work. This means that the project leader often is forced to take people who have long-standing dislikes for each other going back months and years.

### ***B. Impact***

It is natural that different departments or individuals may see things from their own perspective. In projects, life is often a compromise. Whether it involves how transactions are handled, how technical problems are addressed, or the like, compromise and a joint solution are not best, but they are also more likely to result in lasting solutions. One impact of these problems is that solutions reached without compromise often favor one individual or group over another. We have seen that when this occurs, the losing individual or department may not support the decision. Wait, it gets worse. They may try to bring up the issue again from a different perspective, creating more problems in the work. In a team, the outcome of conflict can be poison to the rest of the team. The problem can grow to the point where people loathe to be in the same room or meeting with the people whom do not get along. This can have a severe negative impact on morale and productivity.

### ***C. Detection***

For departments, we have found a useful method to detect problems is to examine specific transactions that cross departments. This should be carried out in the early stages of the work. Here a trick is to act ignorant of the business. Each department can explain how it addresses the work. You can ask simple questions that will highlight the department's attitude toward the work and toward the interfacing departments. For individuals and departments, a valuable approach is to hold joint meetings early. Here you might present some examples of potential problems that have not yet surfaced. You should then sit back and see what they think. Let people talk as much as they want. Here is another tip: Indicate that you are bringing these things up to establish a joint way of solving problems and issues before the issues or problems become real. Not only do you see how they get along, but you also can determine the extent and depth of the problem — a good early warning of what may be ahead.

### ***D. Actions and Prevention***

When a problem arises, you should not try to ignore it or push it aside. Rather, you should move to a lower level of detail. For business departments this means getting down to the detailed transactions. At that level there is little room for politics or hatred. Instead, there is basic truth. At the lowest levels you will find more agreement than disagreement.

For technical staff, you should pretend or act like you are indifferent and keep asking "Why?" or saying "I do not understand. Help me here." When the technical staff restates their positions at lower levels of detail in nontechnical terms, you tend to find that they have more in common than they think.

Now let us assume that you have inherited work or a project in which the team has become polarized. This is one of the more extreme situations. Can you turn it around? Probably not completely. But you can make the situation better. Here are some guidelines. First, make sure the meetings focus on specific and detailed questions. Then you can employ the earlier suggestions for prevention.

A second step is to assign the investigation of a situation or problem to the two people who do not get along. Schedule another meeting that includes you and the two people. Indicate in this meeting that you realize that there can be different points of view. Next, point out that you are not (we repeat, not) trying to change their interpersonal relations. Rather, you are trying to move the work ahead. We have even stated that "you can still hate each other, as long as the work gets done." This sounds extreme, but it may be the best course of action in the circumstances, since it helps those in conflict to put aside their differences temporarily.

Alternatively, you can try to force them to "bury the hatchet" and be more cooperative with each other. This sounds nice, but it is often impractical because the distrust and negative feelings are very deep and have been long lasting. To summarize, the best approach is to confront the problem by implementing more joint work and effort.

## **V. TEAM MEMBERS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO MANAGE**

People often contribute to team dysfunction without being aware of their negative behavior, or knowing how to address these behaviors in others. Dealing with difficult people starts with identifying disruptive actions, understanding the dynamics and stages of group reactions, and addressing issues with candor and tact.

### **A. Discussion**

Successful teams thrive on the productive dynamics that exist when everyone on the team shares the same vision, work ethic, and commitment to one another. That is not always the situation in the real world of working in teams. Some team members help make the teamwork process easier, more enjoyable, and rewarding. Other individuals sometimes make the team process harder than it has to be.

### **B. Impact**

If people are difficult to manage, they may not take direction well. They may work along at their own pace. To demonstrate their power and the dependence of the work on them, they continue to delay. The end result is that the overall schedule suffers. Another method for these people is just to rush through their work. There may be problems and shortcomings in the quality of the work. This later has to be redone.

In the case of queen and king bees, they may try either to impose their own solutions or steer the work in the direction they desire. Often, this means little resulting change or improvement after the project is completed.

### **C. Detection**

There are several ways to detect this problem. First, you can observe their work and their attitude toward the work. It is important here to observe how they assign priorities among different tasks. When people give your work a lower priority, it reveals that their ranking of work to be done is based on their own feelings. A second way to detect the problem is to watch if you have to give them the same assignment several times. A variation of this is when they keep coming back with questions about the work. This may indicate that they really do not want to do it.

### **D. Actions and Prevention**

To prevent the problem, you should give them some small tasks to do at the start of the work. These are typically things that can be done in a few days, certainly no longer than a week. Follow up on these tasks with reviews right after they finish the work. This not only shows them who is in charge, but it also leads to a suitable pattern of behavior for later phases of the work. When you have identified people who are difficult to manage, do not let up on overseeing their work. Implementing joint tasks between them and others can also help in managing them. Here you are relying on peer pressure to keep them in line. If you inherit work with people difficult to manage, it is a challenge to turn the situation around. The individuals have already had success with other managers. They may feel that you are just the same. You need to assert your authority early. A good approach is to assign them short-term tasks that you will then closely review. For later work, make sure to divide their tasks in such a way that you review their work every two weeks. These actions show that you are serious about establishing and maintaining your authority as a manager.

## **VI. WIDE RANGE OF EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE AMONG TEAM MEMBERS**

A project team is more than a group of individuals assigned to work on one project; it is a group of interdependent individuals working cooperatively to accomplish the project objective. Helping these individuals develop and grow into a cohesive, effective team takes effort on the part of the project manager and each member of the project team. But what happens when there are wide range of experiences and knowledge among team members? How should a project team leader handle such a team to achieve their goals?

### **A. Discussion**

Working with teams with wide range of experience and knowledge among its members has its own merits and demerits. Most projects were carried out in a specific business department in some years ago, where people tend to have common experience and knowledge. Today, the situation is very different. First, business processes are more integrated and complex. They cross multiple departments. This trend is continuing. This has given rise to specialization in areas of individuals' interest. For example, in the deployment of RFID in retailing and distribution, you integrate warehousing, logistics, and supplier chain management. Then you can throw in sales and store

performance as well. So how should a project team manager deal with team members with wide range of experience and knowledge?

### ***B. Impact***

Diversity in skills and knowledge can be strength, but it can also raise problems. One impact is that it can take longer to iron out questions and situations. This is due to the fact that the managers must ensure that solutions will be supported and implemented by the different people and organizations. Diversity means that different people may see the same problem totally differently. Here is an example of outsourcing. A firm outsourced a call center to Asia. Service levels were not good. The call center staff could not deal with the diversity of the questions and problems raised by customers. As a result some managers sought to shut down the call center. In handling this problem at least four different solutions surfaced from user and IT managers. The solutions differed wildly from one another. Each manager favored a solution that he or she was comfortable with, standard human nature. In the end, a three-pronged approach was used that embodied several different solutions: (1) improved Website to handle issues without involving the call center; (2) more training and tracking of the call center staff; (3) incentives for good service; (4) customer surveys of work; and (5) establishment of a backup, referral call center in the home country of the firm (Lientz and Larssen, 2006). As you can see, we used the diverse views to get short-, intermediate-, and longer-term solutions.

### ***C. Detection***

Typically, you can detect that there will be diversity when the purpose and scope of the work are defined. Most traditional project management efforts deal only with technical solutions. Today, more and more of the work lies in business change and transition. It is not enough to implement a system. There must be change leading up to and following from the installation of a new system. More specific steps for detection are to see who can address specific problems that have arisen. Do many of the more complex problems depend on one person? Another sign of the problem is to see what happens if more junior staff attempt to deal with the problems alone, without the help of senior staff.

### ***D. Actions and Prevention***

You cannot really prevent the situation from occurring since it happens often as part of the nature of the work. You do need to recognize the condition and take it into account in planning the work. Greater diversity requires you to spend more time in communications and coordination. Since this activity is already a major part of managing work, some other things will receive less attention.

Here a useful approach is to involve users and IT staff more directly in what would be traditional project management. One proven approach is for team members and others involved in the work to define their own tasks and then update their tasks. Another step is more formally to track issues and problems.

This will help to ensure that problems do not become more severe. On the positive side, you might consider holding meetings in which different people share their experiences and knowledge. This can not only facilitate more knowledge sharing, but can also help build a common view of the work.

You should also make management aware of the complexity raised by the diversity. It does not help to just tell them. They may think you are overstating the case. Here is a suggestion: Regularly report on the issues by type and refer back to the scope of the work. Management will gradually see that additional oversight or involvement is needed on issues.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

A team is a group of individuals working independently to accomplish the project objective. Teamwork is the cooperative effort by members of a team to achieve this common goal. The effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the project team can make the difference between project success and project failure. Project success requires an effective project team. Although plans and project management techniques are necessary, it is the people, the project manager and the project team who are the key to project success. It is unusual for a team to complete a project without encountering some problems along the way. A good nine-step problem solving approach is to develop a problem statement, identify potential causes of the problem, gather data and verify the most likely causes, identify possible solutions, evaluate the alternative solutions, determine the best solution, revise the project plan, implement the solution, and determine whether the problem has been solved. Brainstorming is a technique used in problem

solving which all members of a group contribute spontaneous ideas. In brainstorming, the quantity of ideas generated is more important than the quality of the ideas (Clements and Gido, 2012). With such measures suggested above, the team leader and other stakeholders will be able to handle issues related to project teams.

### **References**

- <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/issue> Retrieved on 5th March, 2017
- Clements, P. J & Gido, J. (2012) *Effective Project Management*. Canada: South-Western Cengage Learning. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. pp 330, 364.
- Lientz, B.P., & Larsson, L (2006) *Risk Management for IT Projects: How to deal with over 150 Issues and Risks*. London: Elsevier. p 61-62.
- Newton, P. (2015) *Management of Project Teams: Project Skills*. [www.free-management-ebooks.com](http://www.free-management-ebooks.com)
- Turner, J.R. (1993) *The Handbook of Project Based Management*. London: McGraw-Hill
- Wild, R. (2002) *Operations Management*. Great Britain: The Bath Press. pp. 399, 402