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## Starting Off on the Right Foot: Take Proactive Measures to Enhance Project Teams' Performance

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# Starting Off on the Right Foot: Take Proactive Measures to Enhance Project Teams' Performance

## Abstract

### Key Findings

- The period between a project's initiation and the project team's first meeting is a crucial time that can significantly affect the team's success
- Team leaders can use this time effectively to lay the groundwork for their team's activities via a mobilization strategy, in which a leader researches the team's objectives, proactively defines members' roles, and staffs the team based on members' knowledge, skills and abilities
- The amount of a team's aggregate knowledge, skills and abilities, or human capital, is less important to team effectiveness than is the proper alignment of this human capital with project tasks.

### Keywords

teams, performance, mobilization, strategies, leadership

### Comments

#### Recommended Citation

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## STARTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT: TAKE PROACTIVE MEASURES TO ENHANCE PROJECT TEAMS' PERFORMANCE

### Key Findings

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## Topic

A project team leader has the opportunity to actively develop his or her team during the period between project initiation and the first team meeting (Hackman & Katz, 2010). Many researchers have unfortunately overlooked this early “mobilization” period, believing that the team’s life cycle begins at the first meeting. Little research has been done on the effects that team leaders’ mobilization efforts have on their teams’ success, or on the mechanisms whereby these mobilization activities affect project-teams’ outcomes.

In a previous study (Ericksen & Dyer, 2004), the researchers of the current study identified four activities that team leaders can undertake during this mobilization period. Leaders engaged in outreach contacted their project’s clients and other stakeholders to obtain information about the project’s technical requirements and political context (content clarification). They defined the tentative roles and responsibilities for members, and identified the human capital needed to accomplish the project (competency-based staffing). They engaged again in outreach to identify potential team members, and negotiated with prospective members’ supervisors to ensure that members would have sufficient time to work on the project team. Then, the leaders laid out the preliminary plans and timetables for the project (process formation). The researchers labeled the aggregate of these four activities the leaders’ “mobilization strategy.”

In that same study, the researchers found that some team leaders spent significant effort and time on the four activities, or had a “comprehensive” mobilization strategy, while others did much less, and had a “limited” mobilization strategy.

In the current study, the researchers explored how team leaders’ mobilization strategies affected their teams’ success, measured by team performance and team-level satisfaction. They also studied the formation of social capital within teams, or the rise of collaborative and supportive work relationships among team members, to see how social capital is related to mobilization strategy and team performance and satisfaction.

## Study Questions

- How do team leaders' mobilization strategies affect their team's performance and satisfaction levels?
- When members' knowledge, skills and abilities are aligned with the team task, how does this affect team performance and satisfaction?
- Can team leaders' mobilization strategies affect the development of social capital within teams?
- How does social capital affect a team's performance and team-level satisfaction?

## Results

- In project teams, the comprehensiveness of a team leader's mobilization strategy directly affects team performance and member satisfaction.
- The better the alignment of human capital with the project task, in general, the better the team's performance and satisfaction will be.
- In general, the more comprehensive a team leader's mobilization strategy, the better will be the resulting social capital among team members.
- The social capital that forms in a team as a result of the leader's mobilization strategy tends to affect the team's performance and satisfaction levels.

## Size Doesn't Matter; Alignment Does

Project teams are often described in terms of three important attributes: team size (number of members or number of labor hours available to the team); diversity; and members' knowledge, skills, and abilities (Wageman, 2005). In the current study, the researchers sought to combat some implicit assumptions of past studies, such as that a larger amount of knowledge, skills and abilities, or "human capital," is always better (Stewart, 2006).

The researchers posited, instead, that it is crucial to properly align available human capital with project tasks, in two ways: application alignment, in which members perform essential tasks rather than wasting their time; and effort alignment, in which team members are collectively focused on accomplishing the team's tasks.

In general, the comprehensiveness of a team leader's mobilization strategy is directly related to human-capital alignment. A leader who engages in extensive mobilization activities is well versed in the team's workloads and human-capital requirements, knows potential team members' capabilities, and ensures members can devote sufficient time to teamwork. The leader is able to flesh out goals and work requirements, formulate plans and elucidate members' roles.

A leader with a comprehensive mobilization strategy is well equipped to allocate the right members to the right tasks at the right times (Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). The leader's understanding of team interactions encourages team members to achieve team goals.

## Jump-starting social-capital formation

The researchers also focused on the rise of social capital within teams. Social capital can be either deployed beyond team boundaries to access resources from outsiders to benefit the team ("bridging"), or fostered and exploited within the team itself ("bonding") (Granovetter, 1992; Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Lincoln & Miller, 1979).

Many researchers assume that social capital develops over time, often as a result of team members interacting for other purposes (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In this study, the researchers wished to determine whether team leaders' mobilization efforts could expedite the growth of social capital. Leaders performing competency-based staffing pool their own knowledge with that of outsiders to select members for not only their own capabilities, but their abilities to work with specific other individuals (Balkundi & Harrison 2006; Borgatti & Foster 2003; Hansen 1999; Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998; Reagans & Zuckerman 2001). They provide members with clear goals, project specifications, and task expectations around which to rally.

Social capital can enhance project-team effectiveness by improving resource flow and knowledge sharing among team members, and can enhance collaboration, increase respect and trust, and improve problem solving. Some literature points out the dangers of engaging in groupthink, in which case a team may prematurely curtail its search for information and speed to a consensus on a suboptimal solution (Krackhardt 1999, Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998; Sparrowe et al 2001). The researchers here argue, however, that because teams are typically formed to conduct specific tasks under tight deadlines, and have a relatively short lifespan, they do not experience much opportunity to develop high levels of groupthink and conformity.

A greater amount of social capital resulting from a leader's comprehensive mobilization strategy also tends to lead to greater team-level satisfaction, as the team functions smoothly and harmoniously, and members tend to communicate well with each other and be well attuned to each other's emotional states (Adler & Kwon 2002, Gittell, Weinberg, Pfefferle & Bishop 2008).

## Limitations and directions for future research

Researchers would do well to devote more attention to the formative phase of team development. Why do some leaders conduct comprehensive mobilization strategies while others don't? Does the deficiency stem from a lack of personal ability or of training and awareness?

Researchers should focus on human capital more with respect to alignment. Alignment can be considered in terms of composition, i.e., required number of members, appropriate time commitments, and essential personal attributes to be deployed in the service of team goals. It is important to consider the extent to which talent is properly allocated across assignments and focused on essential activities. In addition, future efforts would do well to further examine the effects of social capital on project-team effectiveness.

A limitation of this study is that it was conducted within a single organization. What environmental factors affect the use of mobilization strategies, and how do these translate to team results? In organizations with a strong culture, would team leaders be able to spend less effort on outreach, and focus their efforts on competency-based staffing and process formation, since team members would already share similar purposes, norms and values?

A final limitation is that the researchers were unable to study team processes over a longer period of time. Does a leader's tendency to engage in comprehensive mobilization activities also predict his or her ability to effectively coach the team over time? Do team leaders' comprehensive or limited mobilization efforts reflect their abilities to manage longer-term talent issues over time, and, if so, do effective team leaders become more effective while ineffective leaders lose their effectiveness?

## Takeaway

It is extremely important for organizations and team leaders to assure that teams are carefully formed from the start

Team leaders should make effective use of the period between project initiation and team launch

Leaders would be well advised to use the time before the team's first meeting to engage in comprehensive mobilization strategies incorporating outreach, competency-based staffing, and process formation.

## Data source

The researchers studied project teams in the Global Application Services (GAS) unit of a large, U.S.-based multinational conglomerate. The unit, which comprises about 600 professionals and technicians, is responsible for developing and implementing information technology solutions for the firm's other units. Teams were studied in three waves, over a one-year period between February 2007 and January 2008. February 23, 2007; July 27, 2007; January 11, 2008. The 82 teams that entered in the first wave were surveyed three times; the 14 teams that entered in the second wave were surveyed twice, and the 18 teams that began in the third wave were surveyed only once. The average team comprised five members representing 2.4 different GAS departments.

The researchers measured the comprehensiveness of leaders' mobilization strategies with specific questions on content clarification, staffing, and process formation. To measure social capital, they asked team members to rate their working relationship with each other team member on a five-item Likert-type scale. For team performance, project champions were asked to rate their team's: productivity; quality of work done; ability to meet customer needs, complete work on time and within the cost estimate; and overall performance. Team-level satisfaction was gauged by asking team members the extent to which they enjoyed working and communicating with the rest of the team. The researchers controlled for project size, project experience, and team churn rates.

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