

The psychology of stakeholder management: What makes the team work?

by Alan Bourne

Psychologist Alan Bourne continues his series looking at ways in which people can work better together



In most projects, creating the right team and helping it to deliver effectively are crucial to success. Despite what you might think from the management rhetoric, working in teams is hardly new. In fact, it goes back to the earliest hunter-gatherer groups who worked collectively to catch their prey, gather food, find shelter and tend for their young. In other words, working as a team has been central to human evolution and survival.

You could, however, be forgiven for not realising this given the difficulties many teams find in getting started and achieving their goals. Much of this is due to the context in which modern teams operate. The emergence of large commercial organisations is fairly recent and enabling teams to function well in this context is a significantly more complex task.

This is particularly relevant to project teams, which are often set up in a matrix structure across existing business functions. The project team is often a temporary, fluid team that operates alongside often more formalised and embedded structures, allegiances and networks. These may include line-management structures, partnership between organisations and business functions.

Strong teams are innovative and solve problems that come their way. As a result, objectives get delivered and team members are more likely to enjoy their work. So, what is required to make teams work?

What makes a successful team?

There are a number of important factors influencing the success of teams. Despite their simplicity, it is surprising how often one or more of these is lacking:

Clear purpose: For a team to be a 'real' team, rather than a collection of people who happen to be in the same part of the organisation, there needs to be a shared task, eg, we are here to monitor and tracks the benefits of this project.

Interdependence between roles: Teams work best when roles are complementary and

support each other to get the job done. The task should be best achieved by individuals working closely together, each bringing something unique to the project. Otherwise, there is little point in creating a team.

Right size, skills and people: Teams need to be the right size and have the right mix of people. The right team size is typically three to eight people, more than this tends to become difficult to manage. For instance, in many sports the larger team may be split into 'forwards' and 'backs'. Members also need to have the right knowledge and skills in their expert area and also need to be skilled in teamwork, understanding each other and working together to solve problems. Having a mix of personalities is also important; for instance, different people who enjoy generating ideas, providing helpful critique, leading by doing, supporting others and being willing to get on with the task until it's completed.

Cohesion: Good interpersonal relationships between team members are a must for a team to be sustainable. People should be able to be frank but constructive and be able to resolve conflicts should they occur. Members should want to work in the team, enjoy the work, feel valued and gain appropriate rewards for being there.

Cooperation with other teams: It is easy for a project team to come to loggerheads with another team or group of stakeholders in an organisation. From the organisational perspective, the last thing you want to see are lots of strong teams all working against each other! For this reason, it is always important that cooperation between teams is encouraged and built into to how people are managed.

Leadership: Teams need good leadership on two levels. Firstly, a team leader needs to set a clear direction and ensure all members know what they need to be doing. Secondly, teams need work to maintain them, provide social support

and resolve individuals' problems when they occur. In project environments, which are by their nature very task-focused, it is easy to treat people as 'resource' rather than provide the support and recognition that they need. It can often be more effective to share out leadership roles rather than expect one person to lead on all fronts, providing opportunities for team members to lead on specific tasks.

Innovation and problem-solving: This requires good communication between team members with everyone able to input helpfully. The project team also need to avoid 'group-think' (failing to listen to objective, outside information) and make sure decisions are based on good data. Teams that are working well are always constantly improving what they do and finding new ways to get the job done more effectively.

Five steps to creating and developing teams successfully
Having outlined the characteristics of successful project teams, what do you need to do to get there? Below are five steps to making teams work.

1. Make sure the team's purpose is clear.
The task and goals should be transparent and require people to work interdependently. Moreover, the task should have a clear place in the wider activities of a programme of change or an organisation as a whole. Teams will then need latitude to refine and adapt this so they can take ownership of their goals. If these conditions are not met, then the odds are stacked against success. For many projects, there may initially be apparent duplication or overlap with other activities being conducted within an organisation. Clarifying these boundaries from the start is essential.

2. Create the context for the team to work in.
This is one of the most important yet most neglected aspects of team development. One of the main reasons that teams run into difficulties, particularly in the case of project teams, is when

other processes are working against their success. If people are only given bonuses for their individual performance rather than that of the whole team, or can get away without working cooperatively with others, then it is quite likely that unhelpful competition or internal politics will occur. The hierarchical structures found in many organisations can impede teamwork, as differences in status between team members can interfere with honest communication and good problem-solving. Creating opportunities for all team members to contribute equally is vital to overcome this.

3. Select the right leaders and team members.

For teams to be successful, they need leaders and members with the right skills and abilities. Team leaders need to be able to communicate well, lead innovation, set clear objectives and support team members. Team members should have the right technical skills in their area of expertise as well as the 'soft skills' for working in groups, such as giving feedback and collaborative problem-solving. When new members join an existing team, buddying them up with experienced team members can also help to integrate them quickly and ensure they are supported.

4. Create and develop the team.

One of the key tasks for team leaders is to clarify the norms of behaviour in the group. This is important where people are used to being managed individually and are not as willing as they might be to support each other. This is particularly an issue in the UK, whereas other cultures, such as in Scandinavian countries, find this way of working much more comfortable.

Once a team has been put together, the best way to develop team cohesion is not necessarily to go on an expensive adventure trip to bond. Far more helpful is to spend time focused on why the team is there and working out how best to work together.

It is essential to clarify the team's task and define the vision and objectives for the project team. Other key areas to address are how decisions will be made, how the team will work together to solve problems and how performance will be measured. Collectively agreeing the ground rules at the outset and getting on with the task are often the best way for teams to develop. Doing so provides a structured framework for the social process of people getting to know each other and developing trust.

5. Sustain effectiveness.

As part of regular project meetings, time should also be taken to reflect on how well the team is working. This means reviewing performance against agreed criteria (eg, delivering outputs to specification, being a good place to work). Most important of all, the team should regularly discuss what could be done to increase effectiveness. This is the sign of a strong team, one that constantly seeks ways to improve.

Summary

When it comes to projects and programmes, teams are often transient in nature with members joining or leaving at different phases. Creating a shared sense of purpose and cohesion in project teams can be challenging. Making the team work requires regular attention, a clear focus, the right mix of people and most importantly, good leadership and a supportive context.

Reflect on your current project team. How does it match against the criteria for successful teams? How much could be gained by addressing opportunities to improve?

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