Team building in project management

Secret Ingredients for Blending American and Japanese Management Technology

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One of the most important developments that occurred in the management field during the 1970s was the increasingly common use of project teams to implement short-term efforts, efforts that realized organizational objectives. And from this practice, project managers quickly learned how teambuilding promotes effective team performance, which leads to successful project outcomes. This article examines how project managers can resolve the issues that commonly interfere with a project team’s development and performance. In doing so, it identifies the three forces that are key to developing effective teams and defines the purpose of teambuilding. It then discusses a study involving more than 90 project leaders, a study from which comes a detailed listing of the eleven major barriers obstructing project team development. Following this, it outlines an alternative approach for developing teams.

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Introduction

One of the most important developments in management during the 1970’s has been the widespread application of project teams to a variety of complex tasks. Project managers quickly learn the critical significance of the effective project team and the role of team building activities in facilitating project management performance. In fact, the difference between successful and unsuccessful performance can often be linked to the effectiveness of the project team. We expect that the 1980’s will surely witness an increased emphasis on team building.

Varney notes that the importance of developing effective teams comes from three major forces. First, there are more specialists/experts within organizations whose talents need to be focused and integrated into a larger task. Second, more organizational members want to become increasingly involved in their total work environment. Third, the benefits of people working together can result in important synergy and creativity. Increasing task complexity and complicated environmental interfaces also encourage the development of effective teams. Effective team building also leads to higher levels of job satisfaction.

Team Building Defined

Team building is the process of taking a collection of individuals with different needs, backgrounds and expertise and transforming them by various methods into an integrated, effective work unit. In this transformation process, the goals and energies of individual contributors merge and support the objectives of the team.

The concept of team building becomes critically important as bureaucratic hierarchies decline and horizontally-oriented teams and work units become increasingly important. In most cases, team building involves relationships among peers with a wide diversity of expertise.

Major Barriers To Project Team Development

In a recent exploratory field probe with over 90 project leaders, we attempted to identify some of the major barriers project leaders experience in building effective teams. The project leaders represented several types of organizations and technologies. Most of the respondents to our probe, however, were in research and development, construction, and engineering projects and computer information systems. The study identified eleven major barriers that obstructed project team development.
system implementors. A more comprehensive study is planned to develop detailed data on team-building barriers. Our purpose here is to illustrate some of the most common major barriers to team-building efforts and suggest alternative approaches for handling these problems.

Differing Outlooks, Priorities, Interests and Judgments of Team Members

A major barrier is that team members often have different professional objectives and interests. Yet project accomplishment often requires team members to place “what’s good for the project” above their own interest areas. When team members are reluctant to do so, severe problems develop in building an effective team. This problem is compounded when the team relies on support groups which have different interests and priorities.

Role Conflicts

Team development efforts also can be thwarted when role conflicts exist among the team members. Role conflicts are most likely to occur when there is ambiguity about who does what within the project team and between the team and external team support groups. Overlapping and ambiguous role responsibilities are also major contributors to role conflicts.

Project Objectives/Outcomes Not Clear

One of the most frequently cited team-building barriers is unclear project objectives. As one project leader remarked:

How can you implement a team building program if you’re not clear on what the objectives for the project really are? Let’s face it, many teams are muddling along on fifty percent of their potential because no one is really clear on where the project should be headed.

In R&D and computer systems projects, objectives may be formulated by managers or clients external to the team. Moreover, if objectives are not explicit, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to clearly define roles and responsibilities.

Dynamic Project Environments

A characteristic of many projects is that the environments in which they operate are in a continual state of change. For example, senior management may keep changing the project scope, objectives, and resource base. In other situations, regulatory changes or client demands for new and different specifications can drastically affect the internal operations of a project team. Disruptive environments are frequently a characteristic of project teams. Finally, the rate by which a team “builds up” to its full manpower base may present team-building barriers.

Competition Over Team Leadership

Initially we were somewhat surprised at the number of project leaders who mentioned competition for a leadership position. They indicated that this barrier was most likely to occur in the early phases of a project if the project ran into severe problems and the quality of team leadership came into question. Obviously, both cases of leadership challenge can result in barriers (if only temporary) to team building. Frequently, these challenges were covert challenges to the project leader’s ability.

Lack of Team Definition and Structure

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers of all was the lack of a clearly delineated team to undertake a project. We found this barrier to be most likely to occur among computer system managers and R&D project leaders. A common pattern was that a work unit (not a project team) would be charged with a task but no one leader or team member was clearly delegated the responsibility. As a consequence, some work-unit members would be working on the project but not be entirely clear on the extent of their responsibilities.

In other cases, a poorly defined team will result when a project is supported by several departments but no one person in these departments is designated as a team member and departmental coordinator. Such an approach results in the project leader being unclear on whom to count for support. This often occurs, for example, when a computer systems project leader must rely on a “programming pool.”

Team Personnel Selection

Another barrier was centered on how team members were selected. In some cases, project personnel are assigned to the teams by functional managers, and the project manager has little or no input into the selection process. This, of course, can impede team development efforts, especially when the project leader is given available personnel versus the best, hand-picked team members. The assignment of “available personnel” can result in several problems, e.g., low motivation levels, discontentment and uncommitted team members. We have found, as a rule, that the more power the project leader has over the selection of his/her team members, the more likely team-building efforts will be fruitful.

Credibility of the Project Leader

Team-building efforts were hampered when the project leader suffered from poor credibility within the team or from important managers external to the team. In such cases, team members are often reluctant to make a commitment to the project or the leader. Credibility problems may come from poor managerial skills, poor technical judgments or lack of experience relevant to the project.

Lack of Team Member Commitment

Lack of commitment to the project was cited as one of the most common barriers. Lack of commitment can come from several sources, such as; the team members’ professional interests lie elsewhere; the feeling of insecurity being associated with projects; the unclear nature
of the rewards which may be forthcoming upon successful project completion; and from intense interpersonal conflicts within the team.

One project leader made this comment to us:

Let’s face it—some personnel are not suited for project work. Some can’t stand the ambiguous, fluid nature of projects while others simply rather work alone or with a small group of colleagues they’ve developed close working relationships with over a period of years.

As we suggested earlier, the nature of many projects requires the disruption of valued, existing routine work relationships of team members. As a consequence, they may not feel committed to the project.

Other issues which can result in uncommitted team members are suspicious attitudes which may exist between the project leader and a functional support manager or between two team members from two warring functional departments. Finally, we found that low commitment levels were likely to occur when a “star” on a team “demanded” too much deference from other team members or too much pampering from the team leader. One team leader put it this way:

A lot of teams have their prima donnas and you learn to live and function with them. They can be critical to overall project success. But some stars can be so demanding on everyone that they’ll kill the team’s motivation.

Communication Problems

Not surprisingly, we found that poor communication was a major enemy to effective team development efforts. Poor communication existed on three major levels. First, several mentioned the problems of communication among team members and between the project leader and the team members. Often the problem was caused by team members simply not keeping others informed on key project developments. Yet the “whys” of poor communication patterns were far more difficult to determine. It can result from low motivation levels, poor morale, or carelessness. We also discovered that poor communication patterns between the team and support groups could result in severe team-building problems, as did poor communication with the client. Poor communication practices often led to unclear objectives and poor project control, coordination, and work flow.

Lack of Senior Management Support

Many of the project leaders indicated that senior management support and commitment often were unclear and subject to waxing and waning over the project life cycle. This behavior can result in an uneasy feeling among team members and lead to low levels of enthusiasm and project commitment. Two other common problems frequently noted were that senior management would not help set the right environment for the project team at the outset, nor would they give the team timely feedback on their performance and activities during the life of the project.

Overcoming Team Building Barriers

For each of the major team-building barriers identified, several suggestions can be advanced for either minimizing or eliminating them. Table 1 lists the barriers and the suggested handling approaches.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Suggestions for Effectively Managing Barriers (How to Minimize or Eliminate Barriers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differing Outlooks, Priorities, Interests, and Judgments of Team Members</td>
<td>Make effort early in the project life cycle to discover these conflicting differences. Fully explain the scope of the project and the rewards which may be forthcoming upon successful project completion. Sell “team” concept and explain responsibilities. Try to blend individual interests with the overall project objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Conflicts</td>
<td>As early in a project as feasible, ask team members where they see themselves fitting into the project. Determine how the overall project can best be divided into subsystems and subtasks (e.g., the work breakdown structure). Assign/ negotiate roles. Conduct regular status review meetings to keep team informed on progress and watch for unanticipated role conflicts over the project’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Objectives/ Outcomes Not Clear</td>
<td>Assure that all parties understand the overall and interdisciplinary project objectives. Clear and frequent communication with senior management and the client becomes critically important. Status review meetings can be used for feedback. Finally, a proper team name can help to reinforce the project objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynamic Project Environments</td>
<td>The major challenge is to stabilize external influences. First, key project personnel must work out an agreement on the principal project direction and &quot;sell&quot; this direction to the total team. Also educate senior management and the customer on the detrimental consequences of unwarranted change. It is critically important to forecast the “environment” within which the project will be developed. Develop contingency plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Over Team Leadership</td>
<td>Senior management must help establish the project manager’s leadership role. On the other hand, the project manager needs to fulfill the leadership expectations of team members. Clear role and responsibility definition often minimizes competition over leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Team Definition and Structure</td>
<td>Project leaders need to sell the team concept to senior management as well as to their team members. Regular meetings with the team will reinforce the team notion as will clearly defined tasks, roles and responsibilities. Also, visibility in memos and other forms of written media as well as senior management and client participation can unify the team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Personnel Selection</td>
<td>Attempt to negotiate the project assignments with potential team members. Clearly discuss with potential team members the importance of the project, their role in it, what rewards might result upon completion, and the general &quot;rules-of-the-road&quot; of project management. Finally, if team members remain uninterested in the project, then replacement should be considered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility of Project Leader</td>
<td>Credibility of the project leader among team members is crucial. It grows with the image of a sound decision maker in both general management and relevant technical expertise. Credibility can be enhanced by the project leaders’ relationship to other key managers who support the team’s efforts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Team Member Commitment</td>
<td>Try to determine lack of team member commitment early in the life of his project and attempt to change possible negative views toward the project. Often, insecurity is a major reason for the lack of commitment; try to determine why insecurity exists, then work on reducing the team members’ fears. Conflicts with other team members may be another reason for lack of commitment. It is important for the project leader to intervene and mediate the conflict quickly. Finally, if a team member’s professional interests lie elsewhere, the project leader should examine ways to satisfy part of the team member’s interests or consider replacement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Problems</td>
<td>The project leader should devote considerable time communicating with individual team members about their needs and concerns. In addition, the leader should provide a vehicle for timely sessions to encourage communications among the individual team contributors. Tools for enhancing communications are status meetings, reviews, schedules, reporting system, and colocation. Similarly, the project leader should establish regular and thorough communications with the client and senior management. Emphasis is placed on written and oral communications with key issues and agreements in writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of Senior Management Support

Senior management support is an absolute necessity for dealing effectively with interface groups and proper resource commitment. Therefore, a major goal for project leaders is to maintain the continued interest and commitment of senior management in their projects. We suggest that senior management become an integral part of project reviews. Equally important, it is critical for senior management to provide the proper environment for the project to function effectively. Here the project leader needs to tell management at the onset of the program what resources are needed. The project manager’s relationship with senior management and ability to develop senior management support is critically affected by his own credibility and the visibility and priority of his project.

Suggestions For Handling The Newly Formed Team

A major problem faced by many project leaders is managing the anxiety which usually develops when a new team is first formed. This anxiety experienced by team members is normal and predictable. It is a barrier, however, to getting the team quickly focused on the task. In other words, if team members are suffering from anxiety, their attention consciously or subconsciously will be focused on the resolution of their own anxieties rather than on the needs of the project.

This anxiety may come from several sources. For example, if the team members have never worked with the project leader, the team members may be concerned about his leadership style and its effect on them. In a different vein, some team members may be concerned about the nature of the project and whether it will match their professional interests and capabilities. Other team members may be concerned whether the project will be helpful or a hindrance to their career aspirations. Our experience indicates that team members can also be highly anxious about lifestyle/work-style disruptions which the project may bring. As one project manager recently remarked to one of the authors:

Moving a team member’s desk from one side of the room to the other can sometimes be just about as traumatic as moving someone from Chicago to Manila to build a power plant.

As the quote suggests, seemingly minor changes can result in unanticipated anxiety among team members.

Another common concern among newly formed teams is whether or not there will be an equitable distribution of the work load among team members and whether each member is capable of pulling his/her weight. In some newly formed teams, team members not only might have to do their own work but they also must train other team members. Within reason this is bearable, necessary and often expected. However, when it becomes excessive, anxiety increases and morale can fall.

We've found that certain steps taken early in the life of a team can pay handsome dividends in terms of handling the above problems. First, we recommend that the project leader at the start of the project talk with each team member on a one-to-one basis about the following:

1. What the objectives are for the project.
2. Who will be involved and why.
3. Importance of the project to the overall organization or work unit.
4. Why the team member was selected and assigned to the project. What role will he/she perform.
5. What rewards might be forthcoming if the project is successfully completed.
6. A candid appraisal of the problems and constraints which are likely to be encountered.
7. What are the rules-of-the-road which will be followed in managing the project, e.g., regular status review meetings.
8. What suggestions does the team member have for achieving success.
9. What are the professional interests of the team member.
10. The challenge the project is likely to provide to individual members and the entire team.
11. Why the team concept is so important to project management success and how it should work.

A frank, open discussion with each team member on the above is likely to reduce his/her initial anxiety. As a consequence, the team member is likely to be more attentive to the needs of the project. Of course, the opposite reaction is possible, too. A frank discussion, for example, may actually increase a team member’s anxiety level. Often, however, the source of the anxiety can be identified and dealt with in a timely manner.

The importance of dealing with these anxieties and helping team members feel that they are an integral part of the team can result in rich dividends. First, as noted in Figure 1, the more effective the project leader is in developing a feeling of team membership, the higher the quality of information which is likely to be contributed by team members. Team members will not be reluctant to openly share their ideas and approaches. By contrast, when a team member does not feel like part of the team and does not believe he/she can trust others in team deliberations, information will not be shared willingly or openly. One project leader emphasized this point as follows:
There’s nothing worse than being on a team when no one trusts anyone else. Such situations lead to gamesmanship and a lot of watching what you say because you don’t want your own words to bounce back in your face.

Second, the greater the feeling of team membership and the better the information exchange (flow) among team members, the more likely the team will be able to develop effective decision-making processes. The reason is that the team members feel committed to the project and they feel free to share their information and develop effective problem-solving approaches. Third, the team is likely to develop more effective project control procedures. Project control procedures can be divided into two basic areas. The first is the quantitative control procedures traditionally used to monitor project performance, e.g., PERT/CPM, networking, workbreakdown structures, etc. The second “control procedure” (and perhaps the most important) is the willingness and ability of project team members to give feedback to each other regarding performance. Again, trust among the project team members makes the feedback process easier and more effective. Without a high level of trust, project personnel are often reluctant to give negative or constructive feedback to fellow team members.

Figure 1
Team Building Outcomes

![Team Building Outcomes Diagram](image)

Team Building As An On-Going Process

While we have directed considerable attention toward the role of team building in the critical early phases of a project, it is a never-ending process. The project manager is continually monitoring team functioning and performance to see what corrective action may be needed to prevent or correct various team problems. We’ve found several barometers to be good clues of potential team dysfunctioning. First, noticeable changes in performance levels for the team and/or for individual team members should always be followed up. Such changes can be symptomatic of more serious problems, e.g., conflict, lack of work integration, communication problems and unclear objectives. Second, the project leader and team members want to be aware of the changing energy levels of team members. This, too, may signal more serious problems or that the team is tired and stressed. Sometimes changing the work pace, taking time off, or selling near-term, more easily reached targets can serve as a means to reenergize team members. More serious cases, however, can call for more drastic action, e.g., reappraising project objectives and/or the means to achieve them. Third, verbal and nonverbal clues from team members may be a source of information on team functioning. It is important to hear the needs and concerns of team members (verbal clues) and to observe how they act in carrying out their responsibilities (nonverbal clues). Finally, detrimental behavior of one team member toward another can be a signal that a problem within the team warrants attention.

We highly recommend that project leaders hold regular team building meetings to evaluate overall team performance and deal with team functioning problems.

The focus of these meetings can be directed toward “what are we doing well as a team” and “what areas need our team’s attention?” This approach often brings positive surprises in that the total team will be informed on progress in diverse project areas, e.g., a breakthrough in technology development, a subsystem schedule met ahead of the original target, or a positive change in the client’s behavior toward the
After the positive issues have been discussed, attention should be devoted toward “areas needing team attention.” The purpose of this part of the review session is to focus on actual or potential problem areas. The meeting leader should ask each team member for his observations on these issues. Then, an open discussion should be held to ascertain how significant the problems really are. Assumptions should, of course, be separated from the facts of each situation. Next, assignments should be agreed upon on how best to handle these problems. Finally, a plan for problem follow-up should be developed. The process should result in better overall performance and promote a feeling of team participation and high morale.

Over the life of a project, the problems encountered by the project team are likely to change and as old problems are identified and solved, new ones will emerge. We recommend that a high degree of effort be focused on problem avoidance in the entire process.

Team Building With Other Departments A Case Study

A variation of the team-building approach occurs when two separate departments or work units are dependent upon each other for support but have intense conflicts which slow or even stop intradepartmental coordination attempts. Consider the following situation which recently occurred in a division of a large, high technology company. One of the authors served as a consultant to the firm.

The case involved an R&D group and a marketing-directed project team. R&D’s role was to develop new technology and support the project team in its new product developments efforts. Over a period of several months, relationships between the two groups deteriorated to such a level that the division manager decided that an intervention into the situation was critical. One of the authors entered the picture at this point. After reviewing several problems with the division manager, a recommendation was made to take both groups to a “neutral” site for a two-day meeting. The R&D manager and the project leader fully concurred with this decision. The meeting opened with a talk by the division manager on the overall status of the division, the role and importance of R&D, and the new product project team in effectively integrating their efforts. The division manager left the meeting after the first short coffee break.

After reconvening the R&D and the project team members, the consultant asked each group to go to nearby conference rooms and clearly establish how they perceived the other group. These perceptions were to be limited to short statements and a general agreement reached on their validity. The consultant noted that if 50 percent or more of the members of a group believed that a statement was an accurate reflection of the other group’s behavior, then it would constitute a general agreement. Complaints or perceptions about personalities were not allowed. The intent here was to keep the two teams focused on detrimental behaviors rather than specific individuals.

After several hours the two groups were reassembled and each group was asked to give their perceptions of the other. An abbreviated version of the results is presented in Table 2. This process did produce an occasional emotional outburst but was handled by the consultant stressing that these were perceptions and part of an overall problem-solving process.

Table 2: Team Perceptions Regarding Each Other’s Behaviors: R&D vs New Product Project Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R&amp;D’s Perception of New Product Project Team</th>
<th>New Product Project Team’s Perception of R&amp;D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keeps Changing Requirements</td>
<td>R&amp;D Not Responding to Market Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moves Too Quickly, Unilaterally and is Careless</td>
<td>Moves Too Slowly—Doesn’t Realize How Aggressive Competitors Are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promises Too Much to Customers and Expects Us to Bail Them Out</td>
<td>Doesn’t Respect Marketing’s Priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Product Development Goals Not Clearly Defined</td>
<td>Hard to Get Straight Answers—Won’t Turn Projects/Technology Loose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Too Much Power and Clout</td>
<td>Resistant to Suggestions/Can’t Do Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t Understand or Respect Creative Process</td>
<td>Doesn’t Understand Importance of Aggressive New Product Development Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upon completion of the “mirroring” process, each group had a chance to respond to the perceptions of the other group. This proved helpful in cooling down emotions.

The next morning, the two groups were reassembled and given this assignment: “What Can We Do Together to Solve the Problems We’ve Identified.” The two teams were again asked to retire to their separate conference rooms to work on the assignment. After a couple of hours, the groups were brought together again to see what kind of suggestions had been developed and if an agreement could be reached. The results of this phase are presented in Table 3. Overall, the session was a success and it set the tone for regular meetings between the R&D group and the New Product Project Team. In this situation, the “team” was the two interdependent groups working together.

Conclusions

Effective team building can be a critical determinant of project success. While the process of team building can entail frustrations and energy on the part of all concerned, the rewards can be great.

Social scientists generally agree that there are several indicators of effective and ineffective teams. At any point in the life of a team, the
A project manager should be aware of certain effectiveness/ineffectiveness indicators. Several such indicators appear in Table 4.

As we progress through the 1980’s, we anticipate important developments in team building. These developments should not only lead to higher performance levels but also to increased morale. We have noted on many occasions that the well developed, highly committed team can withstand almost any kind of adversity. It is the poorly developed team which is likely to run aground when storms appear.

### Table 3
Resolution Plan: Outcome From Interdisciplinary Problem-Solving Session

- Conduct Status Review Meetings to Monitor Progress for All On-going Projects
- Hold Regular Product Concept Sessions to Screen New Product Ideas
- Establish Priority System for New Product Development Projects
- Project Team Members Will be Responsible for Facilitating R&D/Customer Contact
- Develop Team Concept to Facilitate R&D/Project Group Interaction (Matrix Approach)
- Continue These Sessions!

### Table 4
Project Team Characteristics: Effective vs Ineffective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Effective Team Likely Characteristics</th>
<th>The Ineffective Team Likely Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Performance</td>
<td>Low Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Objectives of Team Members</td>
<td>Low Commitment to Project Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coincides with Project Requirements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly Defined Project Objectives Which Are Accepted by Team Members</td>
<td>Unclear Project Objectives and Fluid Commitment Levels from Key Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Members Highly Interdependent</td>
<td>Team Members Operate Independently/ Lack of Coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Encouraged When It Can Lead to Beneficial Results</td>
<td>Conflict Avoided at All Costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Trust Levels</td>
<td>Subtle Sabotage, Fear, Disinterest or Footdragging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Interest in the Team and Team Processes</td>
<td>Unproductive Gamesmanship, Manipulation of Others, Hidden Feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Energy Levels and Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Lethargic/Unresponsive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### References

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Projects are under constant pressure to improve performance, and research is
Team building is a useful project management skill. It is one of the interpersonal skills that can help make the project run more smoothly. There are many books and sites on the web with exercises designed to help in team building. Some team building exercises are designed to help the team get to know each other; some exercises focus on developing trust. In addition to generalized exercises, stronger teams can develop through experience working together and using good conflict resolution techniques.