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EnterPlicity: 10 ½ Ways to Improve the Performance of Your Project Teams



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Introduction

Projects are increasingly at the heart of what an organization does today. Whether it is new product development, marketing campaigns, building projects, process improvement or a myriad of other possibilities, projects are what get things done.

Almost all of us can point to examples of project success and project failure. Many well-known examples of project success include such famed stories as the Apollo space program, and the Chrysler Automotive turn-around. At the same time, time and / or cost overruns occur in a majority of today's projects while they deliver only a small percentage of the desired objectives. On average, 51% of projects exceed budget by 189%, while delivering only 74% of the desired functionality.

At the heart of almost every project is a team that is tasked with completing the project and delivering value to the organization. Effective teams deliver high-quality, value-added projects. Ineffective teams deliver mediocre projects at best and no project at worst.

How can you improve the performance of the project teams in your organization? How can you get your project teams to do more, faster, and maintain or increase the quality of their deliverables so that your project is listed as a success and not as one of the statistics? The purpose of this whitepaper is to

discuss 10 ½ ways that will yield both short and long-term results and that should trigger you to think of other methods that will be effective in your own organization.

#1: Get Everyone Involved in the Project Planning Process

When you plan your projects, get the entire team involved to various degrees. Ask them what tasks will need to be completed to meet the project's objectives. Ask them how long they estimate the tasks to take. Ask them what issues may arise and how you can plan for them. Why? Because when your team has input into the project plan, they will begin to feel ownership and responsibility for the tasks and deliverables for which they are responsible.

David is a team member on a new marketing

project responsible for generating ad copy. He is not consulted on the project plan, but is told which tasks he needs to accomplish and how long it is going to take. David feels no ownership for the plan, nor does he feel a responsibility to complete the tasks in the time allotted. In fact, he feels somewhat resentful of the imposition. When push comes to shove and the project is running late and getting down to the wire, David leaves work on time and does not put forth any extra effort.

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In contrast, Susan is a team member on a software implementation project. She has been involved from the beginning and has provided input into the various tasks that will need to be accomplished and their associated estimates. Susan is excited about the project, feels a part of the team, and is looking forward to contributing. When the project is getting down to the wire, Susan stays late, works harder and is committed to completing her tasks on time and in a quality fashion. Why? Because they are HER tasks. She sat in the meeting and made a commitment to her teammates and she feels obligated to deliver.

A related suggestion is to utilize brainstorming sessions. Many times during project planning or execution phases, questions, problems or challenges arise that must be solved. For example, a product solution must be developed to meet a particular need. Sometimes, a brainstorming session may be an appropriate and effective method of putting forth a solution.

A brainstorming session will get several if not all members of the project team together to brainstorm ideas for a possible solution. Granted, a lot of “crazy” ideas will be thrown out and that is ok. The goal is to not leave any stone unturned, to identify the best ideas, and to evaluate them as a group to determine the best appropriate solution given the team’s current constraints.

#2: Make Status Updating Easy

The primary job of your team members is to complete project deliverables in a quality fashion. However, part of their job is also to communicate the status of their work. This is critical as decisions need to be made based on the project’s current status. Can we add resources to a task that is falling behind? Can we source supplies from another vendor since the original vendor is late? What should we communicate to the organization’s customers? Critical questions such as these cannot be asked, much less acted upon, unless you have good project status. And the project’s current status is only as good as the status that each individual provides.

The quality of a team member’s status update is often related to the ease with which they can provide it and what will be done with it after it is provided. If it takes a team member hours every week to supply status, it will either not get done or it will not get done well. If it is a complicated process, they will simply not want to do it. The result is that you will not know for sure at any point in time where your projects stand. This mushrooms into ineffective or missed decisions, poorly executed projects and ineffective teams.

First, make status updating easy. Determine the information that you need to make decisions on the project. Sacrifice quantity for quality. You can collect a great deal of

information from your team members, but most of it will not be used or necessary. Do not collect information that you do not absolutely need. Only collect the information that you need.

After you determine what is needed, determine the appropriate format to collect it. The format should be quick, simple and intuitive. Obtain feedback from your team members on what they think.

Second, as stated above, the quality of the status update is also related to what is done with the information. If a team member feels that they will be “beat up” over any type of “bad” information, they will be reluctant to give it. Ensure that the information is used constructively and that “bad” as well as “good” information can be freely given.

In summary, determine what information you need, the best, simple format for receiving it and use it appropriately.

#3: Hold Regular Meetings

Your first reaction may very well be a negative one because of the experience that all of us have had with irrelevant and / or poorly planned meetings. Nevertheless, done correctly, meetings can be a valuable tool in your team’s performance.

Rudolph Giuliani, former mayor of New York City, held daily morning meetings with all of his top staff. He continued this even through the

September 11, 2001 disaster. This provided everyone with a forum to discuss what was going on, raise issues, learn what everyone else was doing and most importantly, have direct access to the decision maker.¹

You may not want to hold meetings every day, but you can still benefit from regular project team meetings if you follow these guidelines:

The knowledge that decisions can and will be made at the meetings will greatly increase their effectiveness.

- Keep your meetings short. Don’t let your meetings drag on past their allotted time or your team members will grow to disdain them and they will quickly lose their effectiveness.
- Ensure that the right decision makers are at the meeting. The knowledge that decisions can and will be made at the meeting will greatly increase their effectiveness. Team members will be sure that they attend and that they have issues and questions ready. When decisions are being made, instead of being delayed in order to get the right decision makers in the room, your team will become that much more effective because they can take the decision and act on it.
- Have a definite agenda. Don’t go into the meeting without at

¹ Giuliani, Rudolph. Leadership. New York: Hyperion, 2002.

least a basic plan for what you want to cover. Have a specific agenda with specific goals for what you want to accomplish and stick to it. Handle side topics later outside of the meeting if at all possible.

#4: Get your Teams Together Outside of the Office

Good relationships that develop within your project teams will foster efficiencies and productivity that cannot be created otherwise. Team members that communicate well with each other, respect each other and even like each other will work better together and improve their overall performance.

One of the best methods of improving team member relationships is to get your team members together outside of the office environment. Periodically go out and do something fun. Go out for lunch. Take a field trip to another organization that has worked on a similar project. Go to a baseball game. Be creative. You will be surprised - this single, very simple step will go a long way towards improving your team's performance.

#5: Celebrate Achievements

In today's hectic pace, achievements often times go unnoticed and unrecognized. We focus on our failures but rarely on our successes. It is important that you find things to celebrate. Celebrate a set of tasks being completed on time or early. Celebrate a project completion.

Celebrate the little things as well as the big things. This will provide motivation for your team members to achieve more and make your project environment in general more enjoyable. An individual and team's performance can often be related to their attitude. Celebrating achievements almost always helps to improve attitude.

How do you celebrate achievements? There are a variety of methods ranging from large gatherings or parties to very small acknowledgements. You do not always need to celebrate in grand fashion. Sometimes the small acknowledgements mean more. A personal recognition in a meeting, a hand-written note, a crafted "award". If your team members know that you are appreciative of their contributions and are sincerely acknowledging them, they will catch on and continue to improve their performance.

Finally, celebrate individual milestones as well. These do not have to be project-related but could be birthdays, company anniversaries, promotions, etc. This simply creates a fun project environment that team members enjoy being a part of.

#6: Deal with Failures Head-On

Equally important with celebrating achievements is to deal with your team's failures head-on. It goes without saying that this is a difficult task. Every project team will suffer

failures as well as successes. What often times separates the highly effective teams from the ineffective ones is not how they deal with

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success but how they deal with failure.

If failure is not properly dealt with, it will become an “elephant” on the back of your team and will load them down in all future projects. No one will want to talk about it but everyone can feel the “cloud” hanging over the project. It is important that the team sit down and discuss what happened. Simply airing out frustrations can go a long way towards moving forward. Be careful, however. This should never turn into personal accusations or injury. Ensure that everyone understands that this will be conducted professionally and courteously with a focus on how to improve and that any exceptions to this rule are simply not allowed.

It is sometimes helpful to get the project team away from the “project setting” for a brief period of time. Go offsite. Talk through what happened. What did the team do that was good. What could the team have done better? Keep it positive, but don't be afraid to talk about what should have been done better.

After you have gone through this process, work at making appropriate changes. Learn from the mistakes. The next project will not be perfect, but it can always be better. Implement some of the lessons learned.

In short, deal with the failure directly, work towards making changes and then move forward and stop dealing with the past.

#7: Encourage Team Input

Team members can often times come up with the best ideas on how to improve the team's productivity and ultimate success. Be creative with methods on how to solicit their input. Leave a few minutes of time in your meetings for ideas and suggestions. Be open to them. Encourage your team members to provide input regularly and in various formats. Be open with the input and act on ones that are appropriate.

Not only will team members offer truly productive ideas (granted they will offer some unproductive ones as well), but they will feel more ownership and responsibility to the project when they have some input into how the project is executed.

#8: Empower Decision Makers

There is often nothing worse than a project team that has no decision makers. The team must then make decisions by committee which is often a cumbersome and time-consuming process. Identify who the decision makers are, make it clear to the team who the decision makers will be and stick by it. Often times, team member input should be solicited, but there must be one person who makes the decision.

Note that there can be more than one decision maker. There can be a decision maker for different areas of expertise such as product development, testing, engineering, marketing, etc. And the project manager can be the ultimate decision maker for the project as a whole outside of business issues that need to be decided upon by management.

This ties directly in with holding regular meetings. Your decision makers need to be involved in the meetings to make your meetings and your team effective, and to provide a forum for team input and for quick decision making.

#9: Hold Lessons Learned Sessions

Every project will have its problems and share of mistakes. That's ok. However, it is not ok if we do not learn from those mistakes and seek to improve going forward. After every project, large or small, you should hold a lessons learned session with the project team. In fact, on very large projects, you should hold a lessons learned session after every major phase of the project is complete. The purpose of this session is, as the name implies, to identify the lessons that can be learned from the project. For example, how could we have identified those tasks earlier on in the process? How can we repeat how quickly we tested the new product? These should be positive and negative lessons. First identify those things that you did right and

seek to duplicate those in future projects. Then identify those things that you could have done better and identify ways of improving them. Keep the overall tone positive. The purpose is not to make accusations or personal attacks but to learn and get better. State that up front.

It is important that you write down and document these lessons. Publish them (if appropriate) to others in the organization. This provides a measure of accountability and it provides input for other project teams so that they can improve their performance as well.

It is equally important that you truly seek to make

If you ... do not institute any changes to get better, then the process was wasted time and effort.

changes based on the lessons that you identified. If you go through the process but do not institute any changes to get better, then the process was wasted time and effort. If, however, you seek to make changes based on the lessons learned, your team's performance will improve and your projects will gradually become more successful. It is likely that you will not be able to implement all of the lessons that you learned. That's ok. Identify the ones with the largest impact and go after those. You do not have to be perfect the next go around but you should be better.

#10: Put in Place a Method of Managing Issues and Change

Change is a given in almost every project and that can be a good thing. What you need to do is implement a system to manage it. Unmanaged change can very quickly remove any performance and motivational improvements that you have made with your teams. The reason is simple. If your team members have worked hard, planned well and performed well only to be hit by an unexpected change that requires them to work longer hours and that may jeopardize the project's success, team motivation and performance will drop in a hurry.

That does not mean that we should not allow for change – we should. Resources, environments and business needs all change and we need to be flexible to meet those changing needs and requirements. However, we need to do it in a way that does not jeopardize our team's performance.

Your system for managing change does not need to be complex. In fact, it can be quite simple. But it should at least follow these simple rules:

- All change should be funneled through the same process.
- Your team members should have input into the change. They may not have the authority to approve or disapprove of a change, but they can indicate the time and effort required and what the

consequences of the change may be (other deliverables will be late, the project will be later, etc.).

- Do not allow anyone to work on the change until it is approved.
- Identify clearly who has the authority to approve a change.
- Ensure that there is an organizational value for implementing a change.

Like change, issues will appear in every project. You also need a system in place for managing these. This can be as simple as a spreadsheet listing the issue, when it appeared, who is responsible and what action will be taken to address it. Your periodic meetings can be great places to raise issues and in fact you should allow for time in them to raise issues. Your issue management system does not have to be complex, but it does need to exist and someone (typically a project manager) needs to be responsible to coordinate them. This will ensure that issues are not lost or forgotten (this will invariably come back to haunt you at the most inopportune time), and that they do not affect the overall performance of the project and the project team.

#10 ½: Tell Your Team What They Should Be Working On

This is only “half” of a method, because it is often times difficult to do, especially if the team members do not work for you. However, it is also often times a simple method of

improving how your team works on their projects. You may very well find that your team members are not working on the right things simply because no one has handed them a list of things that they should currently be working on.

Periodically, give them a list of tasks that are assigned to and need to be accomplished by them. This should include tasks across all of the projects they are currently working on (rarely will someone only work on one project at a time these days). Keep the lines of communication open so that they can communicate when they don't agree with the plan or cannot keep pace with the plan.

What this step will often times accomplish is to minimize the occurrences of "work and wait". "Work and wait" occurs when one of your team members works hard to accomplish a task and must then wait before working on the next task because it requires a separate task to be completed by another team member who has not started work on it yet. Did you follow that? It happens often. Tell your team members why you are giving them task lists and how important it is.

How can you distribute task lists? There are several methods of accomplishing this. If you have a project management system with e-mail or reporting capability, all the better. In that case, all you need to do is to run a report or schedule an e-mail to be sent to your team members that creates the task list for them. If not, you may need to print out task lists for each team member. It can be somewhat time-consuming

if it is a manual process, but somehow you need to find a way to accomplish this. It could go a long way towards improving your project team's performance.

Conclusion

Improving the performance of a project team can be a very lengthy and detailed conversation covering many different areas of knowledge such as psychology, organizational behavior, business, team dynamics, etc. However, there are some simple, fundamental methods that you can easily put in place today which can lead to noticeable, short-term results, improve the performance of your project teams and increase the success of your projects.

Take a look at your own organization and projects. Come up with other, similar ideas that will also be productive in your organization. Choose a few of the methods listed here that you feel will have the greatest impact and focus on these.

Project management is not easy, but with some persistence, flexibility and the implementation of some fundamental project management practices, you can begin to see more success in your own projects.

About Team Interactions

Team Interactions, Inc. is a privately held California corporation with headquarters in San Marcos,

California outside of beautiful San Diego.

The company was founded to provide simple, powerful solutions to address the critical project management needs of organizations in various industries. Its in-house project management and technical expertise give Team Interactions an ideal position to produce high-quality, effective, and budget-conscious solutions.

The company's products and services include the EnterPlicity Project Management System, training services, custom solutions, and other professional services.

For more information, or for a free consultation on your project management needs, please write us at info@teaminteractions.com.