

Creating Cross-Functional Teams

By BNET Editorial

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Most business projects require a wide variety of skills to complete the tasks involved. If you're managing such a project, it's almost axiomatic that you will be directing a group of individuals from different backgrounds: They may be members of your own organization, from other units of your company, or from any number of separate organizations. Wherever they're from, collectively they're known as a "cross-functional team."

As the team's project manager, it's your job to organize and unite team members and develop them into an effective and efficient group that can achieve the project's stated goals. A challenge? Indeed, it is—and one that can be tricky and perplexing. However, there are rules which, if followed, can make team building very rewarding, much easier to achieve, and more likely to succeed. This article lays out the basics.

What You Need to Know

I'm new to project management, and have to build and lead a cross-functional team: Where do I start and how do I find the right people?

Begin by thinking carefully about the task at hand and the skills it requires. Next, identify those around you who have those skills plus the enthusiasm to tackle the project. This is also the time to identify any skills needed from outside your organization. Then it's a matter of recruiting the men and women you identified—and that may include getting whatever supervisory approval you first may need. Obviously, your list of candidates can vary enormously, depending on the size of your project and what it entails.

If, for example, you are organizing an office move, you're apt to need floor planners, packers, movers, electricians to install wiring, IT staffers to address computer requirements, and telecommunications experts to address phone requirements. Your team probably will need to come from all parts of your company, so that you match the right people with the right skills and also get essential input and involvement from all parts of your organization.

You may well find that your senior "stakeholder"—the executive who appointed you, for example—can be an ally, and help you find and recruit the persons you need.

How do I get the right mix of personalities and skills in a project team?

This is exactly the way you should be thinking! The mix of personalities on a cross-functional team can have a staggering effect on how well it performs—or whether or not it performs at all. In the final analysis, how well team members work together can be more important than the skills individuals bring to the project.

In getting started, what kind of personalities might one want to identify?

Let's start with the dozen common team roles identified by Dr. Meredith Belbin, a noted British business writer, educator and consultant. They emerged as part of his research that dates to the late 1960s. His insights have stood the test of time on both sides of the Atlantic, to wit:

- *Leader*: Aims to get the best out of everyone, identifies needs, forms the team, sets objectives, monitors performance, provides structure, and is responsible for the task
- *Challenger*: Rocks the boat, adopts unconventional approaches, challenges the accepted order, but also can be one who comes up with innovative ideas
- *Expert*: Provides a specialist's advice and an objective viewpoint from an external source (for examples: IT or accounting)
- *Ambassador*: Makes friends easily, develops external relationships, understands external environment, sells the team to others
- *Judge*: Down to earth, logical and careful—listens, evaluates, ponders before deciding, avoids arguments, seeks truth and encourages the team to find the best way
- *Innovator*: Provides source of vision, ingenuity, and creativity—uses imagination, motivates others, evaluates and builds on ideas, deals with complex issues
- *Diplomat*: Steers team to successful outcome, influential, builds alliances within and outside of the team, good negotiator, helps build consensus, often becomes leader if difficulties arise
- *Conformer*: Helpful, reliable, co-operative—fills gaps, is jack-of-all-trades, seldom challenges authority
- *Outputter*: Chases progress, self-motivated, focuses on tasks and results, imposes timescales, checks progress, intolerant of other people
- *Supporter/mediator*: Focuses on team relationships, builds morale, resolves conflict and gives advice, supports and encourages team members
- *Quality controller*: Ensures tasks are done well, checks output, is preoccupied with high standards and focuses on quality
- *Reviewer*: Monitors and reviews performance, observes and promotes feedback, looks for pitfalls

Ideally, you need a good mix of these types of people on your team; having too many of one type is likely to cause problems. Imagine a team full of judges, or challengers, for instance! Keep in mind that a team member can fulfill more than one role at a time.

That said, don't fret if your team does contain quite a few of the same types of people, for there are ways to cope. For example, you can split your team into smaller "working parties," with each one responsible for particular tasks that contribute to the project's overall goals.

What to Do

Learn About the Stages of Team Formation

Teams go through a number of stages after being first assembled, and these stages can be the source of the myriad problems and/or challenges that arise.

Say, for example, your team is confronting an especially thorny dilemma and, predictably, conflict and arguments erupt. If you recognize this as simply a result of the stage your team has reached—rather than wonder what on earth happened—it will help you judge objectively what, if anything, needs to be done—other than letting the dilemma run its course.

The four "standard" stages of team formation are:

- *Forming*: Excitement is high; everything is new and fun; no one knows what they're doing yet but doesn't worry about it.
- *Storming*: Roles are assigned; personalities begin to emerge; people don't yet feel safe being open and honest; in turn, uncertainty about others and their abilities can fuel conflicts, which can smolder unless tackled promptly.
- *Norming*: Confidence starts to improve; relationships strengthen; differences of opinion are respected; solutions begin to emerge and are developed; goals become manageable, and everyone starts to work together to achieve them.
- *Performing*: The team becomes fluid, and people take turns leading; delegation occurs so team members grow and flourish; goals and targets are met regularly and effectively.

Give the *Norming* Process Momentum

On any project team, it is important to align the "vectors." A vector is a force that pulls in a certain direction, and every team member will have his or her own, created by individual beliefs, thoughts, and desires. Within a team, it can be disastrous if everyone's vectors are all straining in different directions; even one team member pulling in an opposite direction, that is, an "anti-vector," will have an adverse effect.

One of a project manager's primary responsibilities is getting every team member pulling in the same direction to achieve the project goals—a process known as “vectorship.” Although this sounds obvious, it's still astonishing how many projects fail because individuals who are being negative are allowed to go unchallenged.

The best way to align these vectors is to create a working climate that regards mistakes and failures as learning experiences (not occasions for blame), and that ensures every member feels in the loop. A number of factors contribute to this type of an atmosphere:

- *A free flow of information:* Make sure every member has easy access to any information he or she needs to do an assigned job.
- *Open communication:* Don't keep secrets, or allow team members to feel that some people are privy to information that others aren't.
- *Frequent feedback:* People need to know how well they're doing—and if, how, why and where improvements can be made.
- *Regular one-to-one interaction:* Talk to your team members as full colleagues and use the time to make sure they're happy and feel as if they are contributing.
- *A listening culture:* Also make sure people feel free to say what they think without fear or anger, and that they will be heard even if they're voicing minority or unpopular views.

Know What Motivates (and Annoys) Team Members

Motivation is essential for individuals and teams to work effectively and harmoniously. Studies of what motivates people at work reveal that *motivators* and *de-motivators* are not necessarily the same thing; what can motivate people and fuel their enthusiasm are not always the same things that, if unsatisfactory, leave them feeling discontented and apathetic.

Here are the top 10 motivators for project team members, and the top 10 de-motivators:

Motivators

- Recognition
- Achievement
- Responsibility
- Co-worker relations
- Remuneration
- Relations with project manager
- Leadership
- The work itself
- Advancement

- Personal development

De-motivators

- Relations with project manager
- Co-worker relations
- Remuneration
- Leadership
- Security
- Working conditions
- The organization's policy
- Team subordinate relations
- Personal time
- Title/status

from R. J. Yourzak, "Motivation in the Project Environment"

With these lists in mind, examine your list of team members and consider what you think motivates each of them, or small groups of them if it is more appropriate. Then consider whether any of the de-motivators listed are present anywhere within your project. Finally, try to identify anything you can do to boost the positives and minimize the effect of the negatives.

Delegate—But Don't Forget About Supervision

Delegation is another vital tool for managing a project team. Telling others what to do—the essence of delegating—may look ever so easy and straightforward, yet it's not something that everyone finds easy to do, especially at first. Delegating does get easier with practice, though, and will help a project run smoothly. Here are some basic rules of thumb:

- Select the most appropriate person for the task. Depending on what that task is, it might not always be a subordinate member of your team; you might wind up "delegating up" to your manager or "sideways" to a peer.
- Communicate clearly to whomever you assign a task, so he or she is clear about what you expect to be told, how and when.
- Break down tasks into manageable chunks, ideally with deadlines at each stage. They, too, help the person you tapped report on the status of a given task; and, if problems have arisen, you'll know it and be in position to learn how they are being addressed.
- Keep proper records so you know what tasks you are delegating and to whom.

The secret of good delegation is to put yourself into your team members' shoes: You are a skilled and capable professional, you know and enjoy your job, but have a project manager constantly peering over your shoulder, ready to second-guess your every move! Or, imagine you are a new recruit still unsure of yourself, your talents and your role, yet you're managed by a "hands-off" boss who simply leaves you alone to sink or swim. How would you react under either set of circumstances? Delegation requires the right balance of supervision and independence.

So along with rules of thumbs for delegating, here are additional tips about supervising it. As is typical, the amount of supervision required depends on one's experience and motivation:

- *New or inexperienced person, low confidence:* Tell the person what to do; show him or her how to do it; put a plan together that includes periodic checkpoints, deadlines and dates for status reports and completion; review the task and provide feedback.
- *Slightly more experience/moderate confidence:* Tell the person what your desired outcome is, and plan the steps together; give less frequent checkpoints.
- *More experienced but needs some guidance and help:* Tell the person what your desired outcome is, allow him or her to plan it and determine necessary checkpoints.
- *Experienced, committed person:* Explain the required outcome, timescales, and checkpoints (if any), and leave it in your designee's hands. But *do not* abdicate all responsibility for the task; you're still the project leader and ultimately responsible for all results!

Resolve Conflicts Promptly

Projects can be breeding grounds for conflict. For one thing, they are temporary situations, and circumstances within them tend to change continually. Unresolved conflict can be very destructive, so any disagreements need to be tackled immediately. Here's how:

- *Recognize the conflict.* It can be either *overt* (clearly visible and stemming from an easily identifiable cause) or *covert* (bubbling under the surface, from a less obvious or apparently unrelated cause).
- *Monitor the conflict.* Look out for early warning signals so that you can deal with the conflict quickly, before it gets out of hand. Early action saves loads of time and stress later.
- *Research the situation:* Spend time finding out the conflict's real root cause, who is involved and what its potential impact could be. Putting yourself in other people's shoes will enable you to understand and empathize better.
- *Plan your approach:* Encourage everyone involved to be open and understanding in the way they interact with others. It might be a good idea to ask people to write down their thoughts and feelings so they can express themselves logically and constructively.
- *Tackle the issue:* Give everyone a chance to express a point of view. Avoid "fight or flight"—fighting back will only worsen the situation, while running away from it will show that you don't feel up to resolving the situation and may lead to a loss of respect. Remember to be assertive, but not aggressive; being aggressive, or passive, will get you nowhere. Acknowledge

the views and rights of all parties. Encourage those involved to come up with their own solution; if they've created the solution, they are more likely to buy into it. Suggest a constructive way forward and be doggedly persistent.

What to Avoid

You Don't Involve Your Team Colleagues at the Planning Stage

Making too many rules and trying to impose your own plans and methods on your team without getting its input is asking for trouble. You've brought these people together for their skills—so involve them from the start. Not only will they contribute information and ideas, but they also will feel as if they own the plans, all of which boosts their level of commitment to them and to the project itself.

You Abdicate Leadership

On the other hand, your project shouldn't be planned and directed by committee, either. You're still the project manager and are expected to lead the effort, marshalling all the available experience and creative ideas at your disposal. A good way to establish and nurture team rapport is to attempt the initial level of planning, to help to explain the scope of the project to the team. Then ask for comments, and don't stop asking until you get some. Then, with these comments in mind, review the final tasks with the people who'll actually be carrying them out, and adjust plans as all deem appropriate.

You Micromanage

Simply put: don't. You'll explode from the effort of trying to oversee every detail yourself. Worse, your team will quickly lose whatever motivation it was mustering. Most project team members are flattered to be selected and bring expectations to the task. Leverage them all. Delegate the work and supervise it appropriately but keep your eye focused on the overall direction of the project—the proverbial “big picture.” As project manager, that's your job!

Where to Learn More

Book:

Michhalski, Walter J. 40 Tools for Cross-Functional Teams. Productivity, Inc., 2005.

Web Site:

Answers.com, "Cross-Functional Teams": www.answers.com/topic/cross-functional-team

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