

How do you motivate your Project Team?

The Project Manager Network - #1 Group for Project Managers

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The following thread extracted from a discussion on LinkedIn represents a valuable discussion between experts. This paper concludes with the results from a recent study on the required skills of project managers in today's market place, and hence provides essential advice to wannabes.



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Ian Mitchell posed the following question:

How do you motivate your Project Team?

Luis Alarcon responded

Isn't this one of those ongoing life questions where the same recipe will not yield the same results (customization required)...some leaders are better at it than others. My initial response is that the power of empowerment with the intent of creating a sense of ownership for each individual is a foundational must. Allowing your team members to make their own decisions without fear of failure promotes growth.

Team members having the autonomy to present their ideas, manage a portion of a project, develop a relationship or negotiate a deal will begin to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Once ownership is in place, the team wants to continue to exceed his or her previous results in order to receive the positive feedback that makes everyone feel like a contributor. The feeling is addictive, one that most of us who are leaders in an organization know all too well. Creating this environment means that at times as a leader you must control scrutiny or insecurities from colleagues and or superiors while managing the team perception to the external world. A team who sees a leader that stands up for them is more willing to reciprocate.

Next, a leader must know the individuals within the team and tailor the sense of ownership goals to the individual. Some members want to advance maybe into your position one day, others are seeking flexibility because they have commitments (family, etc.), and others may require ongoing mentorship to help them maintain a positive emotional outlook. There is no cruise control approach; it requires active management of deliverables, emotions, the creation of challenges, and more. Finally, give your team the credit...promote them to the larger business environment, celebrate milestones, be fair across the board, resist favoritism, and help them get promoted.

It's not an easy task but that's why it takes leadership and not just "management".

Max Wideman interjected

Luis, that's a very nice piece of oratory. However, there is one question in my mind: Can you really do all of that within the confines of a project?

Luis Alarcon

Hello Max - My personal take is that we can't afford to not operate in this manner if the goal is a 'High Performing Team'. I've been fortunate enough to develop a handful of highly effective teams throughout my career but it comes with a price. I average somewhere between 55 and 65 hours per week. There is a heavy initial personal investment but once the synergy takes hold, the same team that you invested a lot of time into will begin to take on many of your tasks and grow its scope.

This allows for a very competent level of project control with a resulting by-product: (professional recognition for the team often leading to more complex and exciting opportunities). My Linked-In account has quite a few recommendations from previous team members that attest to my statements. It's my opinion that this is why there are so few high performing teams within organizations. That's because it's not simple, it's complex and it's not only complex it's ongoing and requires a great amount of energy (raw and emotional). As the team leader one's energy/mood must convey as often as possible a calm and confident optimism even in the midst of chaos.

Book stores are full of team development books, this forum is full of statements which are all correct yet we continue to struggle, as a whole, with developing highly effective teams. (The gap is in the enormous amount of personal investment required to control the ongoing and ever-changing team energy in order to maintain synergy.)

If you do maintain it, the project will succeed...

Max Wideman responded

Hi Luis, you wrote: "There is a heavy initial personal investment but once the synergy takes hold, the same team that you invested a lot of time into will begin to take on many of your tasks and grow its scope, allowing for a very competent level of project control" I think I follow where you are coming from and I am not disagreeing with you in principle. However, what are the sorts of durations of the projects to which you refer and how long does it take for "the synergy to take hold"?

A further complication is that the composition of a project team often changes as it moves through the successive phases of the project life span. And are you able to maintain the same team for subsequent follow-on projects? Many of us do not have these luxuries.

Jim Brosseau entered the conversation

Luis and Max – I strongly believe that you can't afford to not motivate a team along the lines that Luis describes. The difference between a great team experience and a horrible one has everything to do with the team dynamics. That is: trust, shared goals, open communications, support, mutual respect, helping one another – and nothing to do with the 'hard skills' of project management, having a copy of Project,

or using EVM, or even following an agile approach. This comes from my experience, as well as from explicitly asking thousands of project participants over the years, including rooms full of PM's with PMP or other designations.

We do a reasonable cost accounting on our project retrospectives and sum up the costs of team dysfunction when it flares up on a project, then these costs far outweigh the investment in building an effective team as Luis describes. These range from the hard costs of delays, rework, cost overruns, to the softer costs (though still quantifiable at least by proxy) of turnover or resentment or other forms of 'less than 100% committed participation'.

We may well understand the ideas behind the Tuckman model for team maturity, and/or the Situational Leadership model for leadership based on the needs of the team. Nevertheless, most PMs today don't appreciate that we can consciously, proactively, build a team to a higher state of maturity so that it functions as the team and the leadership desires. Team building isn't an afternoon of paintball; it has loftier yet still achievable goals.

While most people have lived a great team experience, there remains little formal expression of effective team building practices. The PMBoK merely mentions that the concepts exist. Agilists primarily developed their approaches (such as Scrum) while working in a highly mature team without consciously recognizing the impact of that maturity on their success, so it doesn't get codified into their approach.

At the beginning of a project we should always be conscious to invest in bringing the team together to learn about one another (what makes them unique), and appreciate the skills and perspectives each one brings to the table. We should also appreciate the differences between one another as strengths for the team overall, rather than wedges that will tend to tear the team apart. All this tends to make the team run more smoothly, especially as issues are identified earlier.

That enables the team to collaborate to deal with them when there are more options to choose from, and leverages all the strengths the team can bring to bear together on the problem. It tends to bring the overall effort down rather than up, and improves the product quality in the process. There is far less talk about non-performers or overbearing bosses, less turnover, and silos are removed. This is not merely theory. I have done this myself in practice.

Max Wideman takes issue

Jim I absolutely agree that it is essential "to motivate the [your] project team" but not to the extent suggested by Luis. It should be possible to motivate the team by extolling the virtues of the proposed project and the benefits that it will bring. If that doesn't do it, you either have the wrong team, or the project is not worth doing in the first place. Check with your sponsor! Make work never thrilled anyone.

Jim Brosseau responds

Max – there are two different philosophies of PM at work here; I doubt either of us will be swayed from what we hold to be true. I agree the team needs to understand the virtues and benefits of the project, but these are merely extrinsic values. I'm at the point in my career where if I can't find intrinsic value in participating in the project (and money is not nearly the biggest driver), I'll step aside and let others do the job, as that's all it will be.

Getting back to the original thread, I believe every participant needs to have some intrinsic motivation in order to be able to contribute 100% to the project. This includes being valued not only for the skills they bring to bear on the project, but also for everything else that they are. I find that the prominent doctrines of PM today tend to significantly downplay the human element involved in projects. That is why projects get done (too few of them), but not nearly as efficiently, effectively, or pleasantly as they can be.

As PM, I am not the boss, and hierarchy needs to be removed from the project. I bring an appreciation for the value of motivating the team as fully as Luis describes. I drive conversations so the team agrees on the virtues and goals of the project, not me telling them. I drive conversations so everyone's strengths are up on the table (beyond their vocational strengths), and everyone expresses what they personally want out of the project. I ensure that any diversity: gender, cultural, religious, motivational values, and so on, are understood and appreciated as strengths so the team has a wider range of perspectives to draw on to solve challenges.

We talk about how to relate to one another to build and maintain trust - not to merely build a team agreement document that gets cast aside, but to nip potential conflicts in the bud. All these conversations take time, but are definitely not make-work. They build a team that I can trust to do what is needed, and support one another through the challenges they will face. Over time they build trust, respect, and appreciation for one another, an environment where fun can emerge.

This way, the project becomes more than merely a job; rather, people have an intrinsic investment. As a consequence, there are fewer turnovers. All the 'hard skills' espoused by the reigning PM doctrines are still important, but I see their value in a different way. Without an appreciation of a motivated, high performing team, a schedule can be built and EVM can be used and risks can be analyzed and the project will be done at some point. But often done later or more expensively or with poorer quality or with high turnover or all of the above.

The perception will be that this PM stuff is hard, and often the PM is the hero that dragged it all through the mud to completion. There is adrenaline on these projects, but not the thrill I seek. With a high performing team, these tools guide conversations in the right direction, the team collaboratively agrees on how they will complete the project, understands what might get in the way, and knows where they are compared against their intent.

This way, the PM doesn't need to know all the answers. The team has more heads to bear on the problem, a deeper sense of ownership with the participation, an appreciation for the complexity of the other parts of the project so silos disappear. Documents are the outcome of collaborative conversations, rather than unread, filled-in templates. I have not seen any downsides to this approach to motivating a team, and I have been on projects driven by both of these philosophies.

Too often we doubt the team, think it is the wrong team, when we haven't taken the steps to help them become the team we all desire. This is a conscious, deliberate process that few apply and is probably the most important PM contribution to the team. This approach isn't 'at odds' with dominant PM thinking, but 'supplemental to'. It is the lubrication that makes the project run smoothly.

I needed none of this to get my PMP designation

A formal study with interesting but contrary views

Of course, before you can practice the admirable approaches to getting the best out of project teams, as described in the preceding sections, you must get the job of being the project manager in the first place.

A recent study published in the Journal of Modern Project Management provides an interesting backdrop to the discussion. It examines the skills required of project managers in order to be selected in today's working environment. Authors Dr. Vittal Anantatmula, Michael Thomas, Ph.D., and Yang Fan, Ph.D. state in the Abstract of their paper:¹

"There is no formula for finding the right project manager in today's dynamic project and organizational contexts. While some research has investigated and identified various skills and competencies project managers should demonstrate, less is known about the structure of project manager skills and competencies needed to fit the changing project environment and the impact of industry type on such structures. The objective of this research is to explore how the emphases of organizations in selecting project managers shifts over time and how it differs with industry type. It is expected that the findings of this study will provide insight into the prevailing state of project manager selection."

And in their introduction, the authors observe:²

"Needless to say, the project manager is a major resource to the project along with the team, the materials, and other inputs. Therefore the selection of a project manager with the right skills and competencies is critical to the project success."

However, after conducting their study and discussions, the authors conclude:³

"The purpose of this paper was to present a retrospective look at the practices of project management selection across various industries over the past 10 years and enhance the understanding of the role of project management in organizations.

By conducting a longitudinal analysis, the study provides evidence for organizations' emphasis on technical skills and the project-specific credibility of candidates more than on their general management or people skills. The study also showed that this preference of organizations also applied across industries. It seems that the organizations' view on the role of the project manager has not changed over the past years as many researchers expected. A project manager is still regarded as an executor of a project who needs to be equipped with unique technical expertise to complete the temporary tasks of the project rather than as a strategic enabler.

Our research results seem to be contrary to the trend proposed by many researchers that project management is becoming more about people management in the context of project management selection. (Emphasis added.)

The authors go on to add:⁴

"The difference can be partly explained by the nature of the project. That is, projects are the means to deliver new products, services and innovative solutions in increasingly knowledge intensive environments, thus, demanding a high level of technical skill from the project manager. It may also be explained by the progress of project management maturity in organizations, with standardized processes and procedures ***that relieve the project manager of excessive people management responsibilities.*** (Emphasis added.)

Our findings suggest that the selection emphasis on technical skills, irrespective of industry type, has some impact on project manager selection, as highlighted by many past

research studies. However, that impact is not big enough to change the emphasis for selecting project managers.

The study could also have an impact on how a project manager places importance for training and education for career progression. Irrespective of industry type, ***project managers are still technical or project management-oriented rather than general management-oriented***. Consequently, their careers will be shaped more by project management knowledge and techniques, rather than by general people skills."

Bottom line

The bottom line for wannabe young project managers is that if you are keen on project management as a career, then first make sure you are suited to this life style yourself. And perhaps the best way to do that is to volunteer to take part in a project being run by a practicing project manager.

Next choose in what type of work you would like to practice, such as engineering, construction, information technology, and hundreds of other options. Whatever you choose may not be where you finally end up, but it should be your first choice to begin with. To move ahead, do your best to excel in your chosen technical field.

Then, as you go, try to observe and learn as much as you can from the professional offerings of project management authors and trainers. And, oh yes, this web site is a very good source of wisdom throughout your career.

¹ Dr. Anantatmula, Vittal, Michael Thomas, Ph.D., & Yang Fan, PhD. *A Longitudinal Study of the required skills of Project Managers* published in the Journal of Modern Project Management, Mundo Press, Curitiba-PR, Brazil, January-April issue, 2014, pp54-65

² Ibid, pp54-55

³ Ibid, p63

⁴ Ibid.