

Rules of engagement

Getting the most out of the people who work for you requires you to fully connect with your team, says **DR DOMINIC GETTING**

Like many professions, project management is not a precise science. There are some exacting tools and techniques, but no project team can use mathematical methodologies to generate strong interpersonal relationships.

Projects can be both exhilarating and brutal in many ways: the schedule, the scope, the budget – to name but a few of the key elements. Project professionals can use these indicators to measure team performance from a commercial or reputational perspective. But project teams that lack positive team chemistry can be perilous because, with the slightest error of judgement, they can jeopardise project success by accommodating misunderstanding and discontent, which then amplifies poor performance.

Arguably, most people invest a great deal of personal and professional equity in going to work, and the real world can impose a vast array of pressures and behaviours on people that they don't necessarily enjoy or know how to manage. It is vital that project management team members understand the emotional characteristics of their people to optimise harmonious working, high performance and loyalty.

How often is this subject promoted in project management textbooks or training material, though? The answer is: infrequently. It may be mildly covered in some places, but the missing 'soft skills' chapter is likely to be found in a leadership theory book rather than a project management manual.

VALUED RELATIONSHIPS

After many years of observing projects, I have concluded that the most resilient project teams are normally defined at the outset by not only the technical and commercial quality of the project management team, but also by their strong commitment to values and behaviours, and them taking the opportunity to instil these into the wider team at every opportunity.

The best organisations operate by values that they vigorously promote, and I have been struck by the potency of these when they are instilled in a project team from top to bottom. Once more, the impact of behavioural values being championed by both corporate leaders and clients should not be underestimated. It means that the project team is flanked on each side by highly influential allies beyond the immediate limits of the project management team.

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INSPIRING ROLE MODEL

A few years ago, I met a very personable project manager called Olav who had served in the Royal Norwegian Navy as a special forces commando – a highly likable Viking James Bond, if you will. We were discussing the scenario of when the 'going gets tough', and how his project had made it through.

Although I didn't work on his project, I knew many colleagues who did and I was consistently struck by the camaraderie of the team. When enquiring about his

career, he recounted his military experiences, stating: "Whatever the mission, everyone goes down at some point – even me. We have to pick up our colleagues and get each person up and running again."

It was a really subtle point, because both of us knew that in projects, team members can 'go down' and never recover. He was referring to professional mental endurance, as well as personal emotional resilience. A simple mistake or a misunderstanding

can ignite a powder keg of professional despondency and mistrust, and even trigger resignation. If project and personal pressures cause a team member to 'go down', a good project manager can use his or her prized re-set key to recover the situation, namely, their relationship with the employee.

Delivery failure didn't happen on Olav's project because he worked to the same principles as he did during his military career. Yes, he was there to lead, but

most importantly to listen, to support and to motivate. People wanted to work with him, they would stay late in the office to see the task through, and they would come in early when the schedule targets required it.

Olav's integrity meant that he understood his people and his people understood him. These relationships underpinned the loyalty and resilience of the project execution team, and helped to correct the difficult moments in his team's journey.



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workloads, or juggling either challenging professional or personal circumstances. The finest project managers comprehend that it is normally possible to lift their colleagues to a better place emotionally by simple engagement: “How are you doing?” or “Is there anything I can do to help you?” This behaviour creates empathy, solidarity and mutual respect.

Reassuring interpersonal engagement is what many people need to hear to reinforce their personal esteem or craving for professional perfection. Many project personnel are inspired and inclined to deliver more than they thought they could achieve, because the project manager is making his or her own investment in the relationship and wider team performance.

Ironically, this strength of relationship also aids the project manager when he or she needs to address mediocre or poor performance in team members, because the instruction to ‘pull your socks up’ is often more potent coming from someone to whom team members relate and respect. After all, most project managers will concede that acceptance of mediocre performance rarely achieves first-division results.

LISTEN AND LEARN

Then there’s the tool of choice that many project managers inadvertently forget: the capacity to listen. By listening and remaining emotionally ‘tuned in’ to the team, a good project manager can gauge positive emotions, but also negative sentiments and mitigate or manage them if necessary.

With regard to the latter, often there are contributory personal factors: a healthcare issue, bereavement, a house burglary – any kind of depressing circumstance that amplifies a behavioural risk in team members. It’s all very well holding a view that people shouldn’t bring their personal baggage into the project office, but it doesn’t always work like this in the real world, and that’s before the stress ramps up on a project.


A project manager who makes time to listen and offer non-inquisitive or light-touch moral support will, rightly, gain the

respect and loyalty of any team member, regardless of the inevitable bad week or month that everyone experiences.

Positive and demonstrable values in action can also be infectious. They can help make a team far more resilient because the positive ‘can-do’ and ‘we-can-fix-this’ culture is something that the team finds itself actually wanting to forge. Anyone reading this may be thinking: “Well, of course they do.” But, in reality, does it really happen by itself? The answer is no. Project managers need to be constantly aware of the value of reassuring their team members, encouraging them, sensing their frustrations, and promoting co-operation and mutually beneficial problem solving, among other practices.

WHAT’S YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

Some authors will view this as ‘side matter’ for the project management profession. I disagree. The differentiator is not only the values system of the project management team, but how this values system is communicated within the wider team.

So how are your team? Have you made time to find out and see if you can help them? Do they know your values? What will you instil in them? Let’s ensure this is a major chapter in future texts and training manuals. 



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