

*“Experience, Intelligence, Pragmatism, Commitment.
Always striving to ensure outstanding delivery”*

High Performance by Design

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September 2014

Abstract

Have you ever thought at the beginning of that next big project or change programme – “wouldn't this be so much easier if I had a high performing team?”

Perhaps you are at this stage and already have a team in place or maybe you have to build a team from scratch. Maybe you have tried teambuilding before but you are unconvinced about the value it added. This whitepaper identifies some of the pitfalls of not grasping this area and importantly provides some insight into high value, practical approaches that can make a transformational difference to the performance of your team and as a result make successful project delivery more deterministic.

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Methodologies for Success

In any reasonably complex project, it is people and their behaviors that have the biggest effect on whether a project succeeds or fails. Of course many projects don't fail as such, but when you look back, can you say that success was deterministic or, did the project only just succeed through a lot of pain and frustration or perhaps chance?

There are many methodologies that guide us through the complexities of projects such as PRINCE for project management, TOGAF for enterprise architecture or RUP for systems development to name a few, but none of these frameworks or methodologies are of any use whatsoever without an equally clear focus on how individuals and teams involved in your projects behave.

Making things deterministic

Good project managers try to execute projects in a controlled environment. That simply means that the important parameters and activities are monitored and adjusted in a controlled way rather than leaving things to chance. Examples would include stakeholder management - we identify our stakeholders, determine what management approach works best for each type (e.g. keep informed, proactively manage, etc.) and then manage our stakeholders. For issues and risks we collate them, prioritise them and track their resolution or mitigation. There are, of course, many other aspects of project management that project managers need to control.

What these project management methods and techniques do is bring a level of control and determinism to project management that would otherwise be left to chance.

But as we've said, successful projects don't just depend on PRINCE, TOGAF, RUP, etc – they depend mostly on people. So what methods and

techniques are available to use from a people perspective to take some of the delivery risk out and make project success more deterministic?

Oh no, Teambuilding!

Lots as it happens; there is a vast amount of knowledge from applied psychology about human behavior that is useful in building high performing teams. But surprisingly many IT sector leaders' impression of psychological methods and team building is far from positive.

This may be a result of the often highly technical background IT leaders have compared to, say, the more social Media or Healthcare sectors and their systematic and logical approach to problems.

"Being part of a successful, high performing team is an experience you'll carry with you always"

But should we really ignore behavioral methods and teambuilding in IT project delivery? Actually many organisations do just that which is one reason why many projects fail.

Typical problems

Many of the kinds of problems that fester in IT projects and change programmes stem from human behavior, such as:

- Lack of understating and/or faith in what the project is trying to accomplish.
- Feeling that the delivery timeframe is completely unrealistic.
- Disagreement about the roles and/or level of authority individuals have.
- Lack of defined and visible leadership.
- Individuals not working together as effectively as they could.

- Lack of consensus on the direction the project is taking.

Why does this happen?

It is easy to see why these types of problem are commonplace:

- Many organisations have very 'static' structures where individuals have fixed line managers to whom their accountability trumps that of the project leadership.
- The job descriptions of individuals might be too ridged for the role that the project requires.
- Individuals may see projects as very short term compared with their 'home department' allegiance.
- Organisational politics may influence an individual's level of commitment to the project.
- Some individuals may be required to or choose to continue in their 'business as usual role' diverting their energy from the project.

Project delivery and change

Probably the most important observation of projects and change programmes is that they are, in most cases not 'business as usual'. They are usually specially formed, have defined delivery objectives outside the norm and often involve a wider group of people from different parts of the organization and externally to the organization.

The second key observation is that people can and will do amazing things if they believe wholeheartedly in what they are doing.

Projects and change programmes of any substance almost always involve new people who may not have worked together before.

If this is the case with your change programme then you need to consider how those people will work together – how they become a team. If you don't then success becomes somewhat uncertain.

Teams are everything!

So, to gain the upper hand, and make success more deterministic, we need a plan and some pragmatic techniques for getting the most out of teams. Here are my top 5 tips:

1. Understand where your team is in the Bruce Tuckman behavioral model¹ – are they 'forming', 'storming', 'norming' or 'performing' – this will help you understand how your team members will work together and define what your next steps are. It's a 30 minute read that will really pay dividends in your team management.
2. Cut through the 'professional façade' of individuals in the team – help individuals identify with each other on a personal and group level – understanding breeds respect, tolerance and the desire to help each other.
3. Take the time to ensure everyone understands why the project exists, what the challenges are; that success depends on the team and that being part of a successful, high performing team is an experience you'll carry with you always.
4. Help people understand that we are not all cut from the same die so our 'receiving styles' (how we prefer to be approached and influenced) are all different – knowing this

¹ Developmental Sequence in small groups, Bruce W Tuckman, 1965

makes your influencing so much more effective.

5. Help people understand what their behavioral strengths and weaknesses are (e.g. whether they are introvert / extrovert, directive / supportive, analytical / instinct driven, etc) and share this with other team members – this helps people exploit each other's strengths.

Although many of your team members may come together from very different backgrounds and be very different personalities, even the lightest touch team building efforts will go some way to detaching individuals from their 'business as usual' comfort zone and provide them the tremendous experience of operating as part of a high performing team.

"People can and will do amazing things if they believe whole-heartedly in what they are doing"

Resources

The following are a few resources that I have found useful:

1. Bruce Tuckman's paper in the Psychological Bulletin, Vol 63, June 1965 – Developmental Sequence in small groups - describes the different stages teams go through. This model has survived the test of time and the work is widely referenced. The insight it provides is easily accessible in various other sources on the Internet, is easy and quick to digest and can make deciding the best course of action in team management much clearer.

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_86.htm

2. Dr Meredith Belbin describes in "Belbin Team Roles" different roles that people prefer, recognize in each other or prefer not to adopt. This is key in understanding how to develop high performing teams through adopting the right mix of roles and matching the roles to individual's behavioral styles.

<http://www.belbin.com>

3. Patrick Lencioni's book entitled "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" provides some good insights into how teams can fall apart and therefore how to ensure the opposite.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Five_Dysfunctions_of_a_Team

4. George Charrier's "Cog's Ladder" takes a slightly different view of accelerating group formation, is easily and quickly digestible and is worth reading alongside reference 1.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cog's_Ladder

5. In 1943 psychologist Abraham Maslow published an article entitled "A Theory of Human Motivation" which describes "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs". This helps leaders manage teams by understanding the fundamental needs of team members.

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Summary

High performing teams don't happen by accident and successful delivery of projects and change programmes is never a given.

But there are things we can do to increase substantially the likelihood of success and at the same time develop a high degree of personal and group reward through being part of that success and the camaraderie of being part of a high performing team.

It doesn't take much to start, but in my experience, where I have seen this done, it gives immense payback far beyond the investment for the organization and the individuals.

ASE have been involved in some of the world's largest IT change programmes. We support and practice many of the concepts discussed in this paper, because we have experienced the dramatic effect they can have on success and the personal satisfaction that comes from being part of that success.

About the Author

Steve Marchant is a Managing Consultant at ASE Consulting. He has over 20 years experience in Information Technology covering a range of industry sectors in both the private and public sector. He has been instrumental in delivering a number of high profile consulting projects. He also leads the ASE Enterprise Architecture practice and has a passion for delivery focused architecture and high performance teams.

ASE Consulting was founded in 1987 and is established across a wide range of markets, providing high quality services in bridging the gap between business and technology. We have a proven track record in delivery results to clients through our core service offering of Enterprise Architecture, Programme Management, Information Assurance, Commercial, Telecommunication and Operational Efficiency.



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