KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING:

A Project Manager's Plan to Sustaining High Team Performance on Time-Sensitive Projects

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ABSTRACT

A confluence of recent natural and man-made disasters—such as Hurricanes Katrina, Ike, and Sandy; environmental disasters such as the Gulf Coast oil spill; and global threats including bioterrorism and cybersecurity breaches—have caused a heightened demand for resilient disaster recovery program and project planning. In light of the increased frequency of these catastrophic events in recent years, project team managers have borne the onus of grooming talented teams, and then leading team members at high-performance levels consistently throughout the full life cycle of the recovery program. Since project managers often initially assume leadership roles to oversee short-term relief projects, their time is focused less on consideration for building team rapport and nearly solely on meeting deadlines; yet, if the project's duration extends to satisfy a long-term recovery mission, the project team must shore up its performance to see the project through to its conclusion. Once team members have become acclimated in their roles and with their cohorts, project managers must proactively engage with the team as a whole to stave off complacency. By utilizing traditional team development life cycle models such as Bruce Tuckman's, while incorporating the preventative aspects of supplemental models such as Tom Edison's that expand upon the Tuckman foundation, project managers can create their own high performance framework which, when executed correctly, creates a high-momentum pace successfully sustained over the course of the recovery program.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the planning and mitigation efforts of governments, businesses, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), catastrophic events not only cause widespread physical destruction, but also severely disrupt the social and economic balances in communities. The crippling physical, psychological, and financial impact of these disasters is felt many years after the event has occurred. Therefore, the affected citizens and governments, as well as responding aid givers, face difficult, long-term challenges of disaster recovery (Leonard & Howitt, 2012). Decisions affecting community welfare—many of which may have long-lasting impacts—are made under intense pressure and scrutiny because it is not realistic to take into account the views, priorities, and concerns of each individual stakeholder (Natural Hazards Center, 2001). Project managers in the disaster recovery field, not uncommonly, may struggle to skillfully balance competing priorities (e.g., regulatory, financial, political, contractual, etc.), which all require them to employ a variety of tools and tactics to complete the project. According to Project Management Institute's (PMI, 2013) Pulse of the Profession® report, properly aligning team members' individual talent with the project's long-term strategy can reap a project success rate, on average, of 14% higher than a poorly aligned team and plan respectively. If the recent rise in both natural and man-made disasters has proven any indication, those responsible for leading recovery efforts must be skilled at building and sustaining high team performance to meet the demand.

Disaster response and recovery activities are often assigned to teams unfamiliar with these activities; therefore, roles and responsibilities are often undefined and may lead to duplicative efforts (Natural Hazards Center, 2001). This only increases the need for project managers to be highly adept at effective team building. In the early stages of immediate disaster relief—i.e., when goodwill sentiments are highest—project managers must seek, identify, support, and rely upon those individuals who inspire others through their creativity, ingenuity, optimism, willingness to work productively, and to make difficult choices, and accept sacrifices (Ahlers, Howitt & Leonard, 2011).

TEAMBUILDING: HAMMER, MEET NAIL

Since project team managers are charged with grooming talented teams, and then leading team members at high-performance levels consistently throughout the full life cycle of the recovery program, it is highly likely that a project manager will be managing a team that they did not initially assemble. Inheriting a team rather than building one from project inception further challenges a project manager to form and subsequently oversee a high-performing team. It is crucial to a project's success that project managers have the aptitude to manage both team members' talent (given or chosen) and the forces that can potentially unravel team morale, to take a team from functioning at an average performance level to excelling in a high performance capacity.

Maslow (1966) said, "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." This concept, frequently referred to as "Maslow's hammer," is in reference to the over-reliance on a familiar tool or method to accomplishing a task. The complexity of dealing with extreme events requires project managers to shift from management of a team to leadership of a team uniquely utilizing each team member's creativity and capabilities. As Pfeifer (2012) points out, project managers can be seduced into the action of only managing rather than taking a leadership role. He suggests that project managers detach from the management of the incident and look to connect, collaborate and coordinate with others to discover innovative ways to solve unusual problems. Gaining an understanding of how teams are formed can kick start this process and help to support a project manager's shift from management to leadership.

THE TEAM DEVELOPMENT LIFE CYCLE

Expecting a newly formed team to perform well from its inception is not feasible in disaster recovery efforts. It takes time to go from being a collection of strangers to an integrated group consistently performing at optimal levels. Dr. Bruce Tuckman's 1965 study of small groups identifies the four stages that developing teams experience: forming, storming, norming, and performing. While analyzing each stage of Tuckman's traditional model is useful to understand a team's basic functional phases, his model requires a greater level of exploration with respect to team development, especially during the dysfunctional phases a team will inevitably experience (Edison, 2008). Team leadership requires the ability to recognize the current stage of development, and intervene where appropriate to move the team's performance forward (Team Technology). Edison (2002) confirms it is difficult to predict when dysfunctional stages will occur, however, acknowledging signs of dysfunction early on can keep the team focused on the functional track of team development and on becoming high-performing. When project managers understand how a team forms and the factors that can break a team down, they are able to propel their new team to become effective more quickly and easily rebound when the signs of dysfunction begin to appear.

Forming (Orientation)

As Tuckman notes, when people initially form groups, their first concern will be to strategically position themselves within the team. In the beginning, most team members are optimistic and courteous. There is some anxiety because the work the team will be doing has not been fully mapped out. As the team begins to work together collectively, they make an effort to get to know one another.

At this time, the project manager should outline the group's purpose and objectives, and set high, clearly defined expectations. They should also assist individuals with understanding how they fit into the team (Seet, 2009).

Storming (Conflict)

The storming phase typically occurs when project leaders become aware of intra-group conflicts. Team members will start to question boundaries, challenge the authority of their project manager and/or compete for positions as each team member's role becomes clearer. Team members may feel overwhelmed by their assignments, become frustrated with varying work styles of their cohorts, and/or lack the ability to forge strong relationships with their colleagues. This is a troubling spot for a project leader because few teams will ever make it past this stage.

Seet (2009) citing Schmidt and Tannenbaum notes that, although physical altercations are unlikely, conflict may manifest itself in the form of emotional outbursts as team members "talk at," rather than "talk to," one another. It is important to understand that conflicts often develop insidiously and usually do not begin as outright disagreements.

Norming (Cohesion)

By this stage, team members are getting to know one another better. The team is developing a strong commitment to team goals and taking proactive steps to accomplish them. This creates an environment that facilitates conflict resolution and builds upon the team's strengths ultimately propagating respect for the project leader.

Tuckman states this phase occurs when resistance is replaced by an in-group feeling, and a sense of cohesion. Norming essentially marks the birth of the realization of the project leader's vision for the group (Seet, 2009). In disaster recovery projects, it is common for project leaders to attempt to fully invest in their project team members; however, during this stage, the project leader should maintain "distance" and allow team members to interact with one another and informally delegate authority.

Although it assuredly is true that leaders cannot make a team be great, we do now know what conditions they can put in place to increase the likelihood (although not guarantee) that a team will be effective and that it will generate a first-rate product while simultaneously becoming stronger as a performing unit and fostering the learning and professional development of its individual members (Hackman, 2011).

It is possible to have overlap between storming and norming. As changes are made or additional tasks are assigned, the team members' relationships may occasionally digress into periods of conflict.

> **It is important to understand that conflicts often develop insidiously and usually do not begin as outright disagreements."**

Performing (Functional)

During this stage, the project manager's job is to guide and actively launch the team; only then can team members take full advantage of a positively created environment conducive to high performance (Hackman, 2011). This is the phase where roles become flexible and functional, and group energy is channeled into ultimate completion of tasks. The performing team is now a truly purpose-driven unit in which members derive satisfaction from working together to overcome the challenges at hand (Seet, 2009). Project managers are able to delegate more work to the project team and transition into more of a coaching role, thereby carving out a place for themselves to concentrate on developing team members to function at their best.

NEW ELEMENTS

Upon closer examination of the classic stages of team development as elaborated in the foregoing discussions, teams usually become entrenched in the norming and storming stages and never make it to high performing. In his research, Edison (2008) asserts, to save or transform a project team, it is necessary to understand and review the dysfunctional phases or obstacles that a team encounters so that appropriate corrective actions may be taken to facilitate high team performance. It is also meaningful to understand other characteristics that can enhance teamwork and team performance.

The subsequent stages of Edison's model (informing, conforming, deforming, transforming) extend beyond Tuckman's traditional model by providing insight into how a newly formed team's productivity can quickly deteriorate without the leadership of a project manager. After a team develops a rhythm of balancing individual responsibilities with team performance as a whole, a project leader must be aware of positive forces such as knowledge sharing (i.e., sharing "lessons learned" with others) to foster high performance as well as negative forces such as groupthink and knowledge hoarding that will naturally transition a team from functional to dysfunctional. While it is critical to capitalize on the team's strengths, it is equally critical for project managers to detect negative forces early and communicate effectively with the team so that the need for transformation is understood. Early detection and correction of dysfunction is crucial to a project manager's ability to prevent a team from deforming or disbanding.

WHAT DO HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS DO BETTER THAN OTHERS?

Project managers must learn how to form, develop, and sustain high-performing teams if they are to deliver on complex projects (Hass, 2010). High-performing teams excel because team members apply a strong combination of diverse skill sets and experiences to their work, agree on common goals and expectations, communicate clearly, foster an environment of trust, and take individual ownership in the success of the project (Wolski, 2011). What further sets high-performance teams apart is that they successfully sustain this momentum over extended periods of time, which can prove to be invaluable when leading disaster recovery projects.

Per the adage of "power in numbers," individuals banding together as a team have the potential to address unanticipated challenges most effectively because they bring more knowledge, skill, and experience to the work than any single individual (Hackman, 2011). Team development (i.e., selecting the appropriate people for the right projects) becomes critical during disaster recovery

projects because resources will inevitably be lacking, which will require specific skills and expertise. While the majority of projects are naturally inhibited by the constraints of time, scope, and cost, disaster recovery projects have additional challenges of regulatory requirements and political influences. Thus, managing all aspects of those expectations means setting team priorities and determining available resources to complete the projects. Evolving from a collection of people—often strangers to one another—to a solid (performing) team and, ultimately, into a great (high-performing) team is largely dependent upon a project leader's ability to harness the various skills and abilities each individual brings to the team (Hass, 2010).

> **"Teams help ordinary people achieve extraordinary results."**
>
> W.H. Murray

Examples of high-performing teams are pervasive. From surgical teams to Cirque du Soleil performances to professional sports teams, these teams showcase their accomplishments, insights, and enthusiasm on a daily basis and are a persuasive testament to the power of teamwork (Hass, 2010). Mark Miller explains in his book *Secret of Teams*, "The more decisions a leader makes, the further he or she is from leading a high-performance team…make too many command decisions, and you'll doom yourself and your team to mediocrity." According to Miller (2011), there are three pillars of successful teams: team selection, constant training, and esprit de corps (i.e., genuine care and concern for one another). The most successful project managers strive to understand the benefits of working in teams and learn how to optimize team performance by developing individual members, fostering team cohesiveness, and rewarding team results (Hass, 2010).

In his classic "Experiences in Groups," Bion discovered there were powerful psychological forces inherent in all groups that diverted them from accomplishing their primary tasks. Examples of these forces are being overly dependent upon the team's leader, splintering off into subgroups or cliques, and resorting to a fight or flight mentality (i.e., engaging in or fleeing from intra-group conflict) (Gadeken, 2002).

Over-dependency on Leadership

High performing teams are self-directed. Project managers are responsible for determining the objectives of the team and managing overall administration. However, team members must be afforded the room to create a fluid leadership structure allowing each team member the opportunity to assume a leadership role based upon their skills and/or abilities. This should be a natural process without interference from the project manager.

Splintering into Subgroups

Because building team culture takes time, shifting a performing team to a high-performing team is not an easy task. Defining a team's purpose—what they're doing for someone else—is the motivation (project managers) needed to connect the heads and hearts of team members (Howitt et al, 2011). Kenney (2014) cites Greg Ellis, former CEO and managing director of REA Group, calling it a "philosophical heartbeat." High-performing teams must acknowledge boundaries that govern their behavior and create mutual accountability (Hedges, 2014). In the case of disaster recovery projects, project managers must find a way to present and highlight the team's impact on the community (e.g., grant applicants, citizens among others) and let that be the driving force that keeps the team's performance high.

Managing Conflict

Team performance usually slows between the storming and norming stages largely because of the members' inability to manage conflict and an unwillingness to explore outside of their comfort zones and to set higher targets. Conflict resolution is paramount to maintaining high performance. A high-performing team must come together using its diversity of skill sets, abilities, and experiences to create a method of effective group conflict resolution. Generally, managing conflict pushes team members beyond their comfort zones, which strengthens team rapport thereby increasing the likelihood of team success.

SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

Disaster recovery projects involve many simultaneously moving parts in highly emotionally and stressfully charged environments. Once the project moves from response to recovery, the focus of project managers should shift from managing a team to managing vicariously *through* teams. According to Hill and Lineback (2012), project leaders should use the social dynamics of the team to manage individual members, rather than managing members primarily one-by-one. The role of a project manager is "as much about *team leadership and group development*, as it is about project and requirements management" (Hass, 2010).

Team Selection (Talent)

The project leader's first task is typically selecting the project team. Project leaders who have the benefit of selecting their team should spend a good amount of time focusing on selecting team members with the appropriate attitude (i.e., cultural fit) and aptitude (i.e., technical skills) imperative to facilitating the team as a high-performing unit. In his research, Collins (2001) concluded that great companies began with selecting the right people first, and then in collaboration set their course. Since attitude trumps aptitude in most cases, negative attitudes can destroy a project just as quickly as skill set deficiencies. At certain levels, most people possess the technical skills required to perform a job. Even so, if a team member lacks a particular technical skill, this is far less of a challenge to correct than addressing an intangible quality like a negative attitude, which can literally cause a team to disband.

> **"If a team member lacks a particular technical skill, this is far less of a challenge to correct than addressing an intangible quality like a negative attitude, which can literally cause a team to disband."**

While it is possible that a project manager could be brought in to lead a team after the team has experienced some of the early developmental growth stages, as they assess the team and its performance, they may also notice correctable areas of improvement to keep the team from succumbing to dysfunction. Since the team is already in place, radical shifts in roles and responsibilities can disrupt the existing team culture. Implementing feedback sessions with the team may help provide deeper insight into the team's dynamics and also help the project leader steer the team back toward performance and subsequently into high-performance by implementing solutions that keep morale high.

In our experience, while assisting a state agency with project management, it was brought to our attention that members of a program team were not providing the compliance team with the documentation required to monitor grantees in a timely manner. In addition, the compliance team was upset by negative responses received from program team members when following up on documentation requests. This tension was creating a highly toxic work environment and the

ability of the compliance team to adequately prepare for monitoring visits was greatly impacted. By conducting separate feedback sessions with both teams, it became evident that the program team had competing responsibilities that hampered their ability to provide the requested documentation in a timely manner. Both teams agreed that the compliance team had the time and resources available to contact the grantees and request the necessary documentation on the program team's behalf. As a result, the monitoring process was updated, regular feedback sessions were implemented to continuously improve team dynamics, and the teams returned to performing at a higher level.

Individual Development (Skills)

Depending on the project (or other type of response to an extreme weather or man-made event), team members will be assigned roles and responsibilities based on need and availability. Project leaders should be aware of each team member's skill level and clearly map skills to project position requirements. Skill deficiencies can be addressed by encouraging team members to "cross-train," providing "refresher" sessions to ensure competency levels meet standards, as well as creating specialized learning opportunities for team members with advanced skills. Chiefly, project leaders must spend adequate time and energy cultivating and developing the skills their team needs to achieve high performance and stave off complacency. Engaging with the team in this way will also help align the team's skills and experiences to allow growth opportunities thereby enabling project success.

While assisting a client to develop a tracking and reporting system for disaster recovery projects, we met with the project team to review the system functions and roles and responsibilities. At the conclusion of the meeting, one project team member approached us and wanted to discuss their role as it related to the new tracking and reporting system. Although he was a financial analyst with a background in banking, he was interested in systems and technology. He asked to be considered as the team liaison for any system-related issues, updates, or technical assistance. He had become static in his role as a financial analyst and wanted to expand his knowledge base in a role that matched his interests and skills. Interestingly, his expansion to another role was the catalyst for other team members to request subject matter training, cross-training opportunities, and to take on additional responsibilities as a means to expand their skill sets.

Building Community

Successful project teams strive to build a sense of community and established trust and respect for team cohorts intrinsically drives high performance. Managers tasked with leading complex projects command and leverage power and influence less so because they reside in a position of authority within the team's organizational hierarchy, and mainly as a result of their ability to build relationships (Hass, 2010). Trust is fragile; yet, without it, the likelihood that the team will devolve and disband is high. Miller (2011) stressed that teams will never perform at the highest possible level if the members of the teams don't exhibit genuine care and concern for one another.

Simply put, high team performance is not achieved through forging friendships with project team members. Rather, it is attained through building a collective working relationship that provides enough of a foundation for the individual project team members to want to help the team be successful. Therefore, project leaders should construct an environment conducive to fostering honest, fair, and open communication; being considerate and polite; showing real concern when non-work related issues arise; and challenging senior management's authority on behalf of their team. Consistently and persistently maintaining this type of environment, as well as being mindful there will be little chance of acknowledgment in its success, is how a project leader builds community.

CONCLUSION

Teams are more successful in highly stressful environments when project leaders capitalize on a team's strengths, interests and capabilities and focus on building a sense of community. Recovery from extreme events presents a set of unique challenges that require specialized team management and leadership skills. Since project managers often initially assume leadership roles to oversee short-term disaster relief projects, their energy is concentrated less on consideration for maintaining team morale and nearly simply on meeting project deadlines; yet, if the project extends to satisfy a long-term recovery mission, the project team must shore up its performance to see the project to its conclusion. By understanding how teams form and become dysfunctional, harnessing the talents, skills, and abilities of each team member and building trust through open and honest communication, project leaders gain the insight they need to assess where the team is and create a framework to transform their teams from performing to high performing.

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