Notes on Virtual Teams

..the communications challenge for the Project Manager

Learning Objectives for these Notes

Having completed these notes you will be able to:

- Appreciate some of the issues associated with the management of teams in a virtual team environment.

Introduction

In a previous lesson we discussed how projects are invariably delivered through the combined efforts of a group of people assembled specifically to deliver the project – a project team in other words! We used the following definition of a team:

*A **Team** is a gathering of individuals who assemble to accomplish a purpose.*

However we also identified that in many cases, these people may never actually "assemble" or "co-locate" physically. There are a number of reasons why virtual teams are more prevalent nowadays – the key driver for this is the fact that projects are becoming more complex with need for more extensive teams with a broader spread of involvement.

Virtual Teams display the following characteristics:

- Project members are drawn from from different nations, regions, functions, cultures and/or organisations
- Project Team members don't physically meet and use little face to face communication
- Units operating in separate physical locations may be using separate project methodologies and work within separate and distinct organisations structure type

The Opportunity:

The use of virtual project teams provides compelling benefits for some projects, including:

- Lower costs - e.g. Less office rental costs, travelling expenses etc
- More efficiency – easier and more productive collaboration through electronic means,
- More effectiveness – easy access to remote experts, a broader pool of skills

The Challenges:

This may also present challenges for the effective management of the project:

- The lack of the rich communications associated with face to face communications due to the prevalence of electronic alternatives
- Few opportunities to build up team integration and mutual accountability
- The difficulty in giving immediate feedback in order to correct or reinforce behaviours
- The difficulty in wielding perceptiveness /sixth sense in detecting problems. Less opportunities to MBWA –(Manage By Walking Around)

What are the implications for the project manager? In the absence of direct supervision a higher level of trust becomes important and in order to control the team the project manager may require stronger influencing and persuading skills.

The key challenge however in all of these cases is to ensure effective communication

Horine provides some good advice:

1. Build in as much Face-to-Face time as possible.
   a. Key times to get team members to gather in a face-to-face setting are:
      i. At project kick-off time when you outline the purpose, roles & responsibilities and methods of working
      ii. In the early feasibility & design stages when team-forming issues are more likely to develop and when project uncertainty is greatest
      iii. Whenever there are problems
   b. Seek partial attendance on site if you can't get full time attendance (e.g. 1 day a week)

      c.   Use pseudo Face-to-Face communications e.g. Video conferencing, Skype
2. Have sufficient set Rules & Procedures in place to ensure that each team member is aware of the communication norms for the project:
      a.   Protocols for virtual meetings – reliable, available and well-understood technologies; Agenda in advance, strong meeting scope control, etc
      b.   Written Team procedures
3. Focus on (and encourage) clear and precise messages, whatever the communications medium.
4. Pay attention to early work performance and verify good performance as early as possible. Be clear and precise about individual responsibilities for each piece of work and set clear expectations for the timeliness and expected quality of the work. Consider using smaller work allocations while assessing this initial performance.
5. Choose Communications methods carefully
      a.   It is usually best to use the methods preferred by the customer
      b.   Use the richest medium feasible for the message or meeting
6. If your virtual team spans time zones – then take into account time differences and calendar/public holidays

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References & Resources

Kerzner, H. (2009) Project management: a systems approach to planning, scheduling, and controlling, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Horine, Gregory. (2005) Absolute Beginners Guide to Project Management, Que

Publishing

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