Project Management:

Fall 2018 Midterm

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Course: BT 353 Project Management

Section: C

Short Answer: [2-7]

Reflective: [8-13]

(1) The project manager meets with the project team to review lessons learned from previous projects. Why is this important and what actions should follow?

It is always important to look to the past to reflect on what actions could have been taken to prevent certain events from occurring, or what could have been done to ensure the success of a project. This is imperative to project success because there is always something to learn from the errors of those who came before you. Most of the reason the events of previous projects are taken down or remembered and brought up is to in fact learn from and show current project teams what to do and what not to do when faced with similar challenges. Many individuals learn by example, and there are few better ways to teach these team members than by showing them exactly the steps an individual took in the past and the result it produced. After showing the team members the lessons learned from previous projects, the project leader should go through each lesson and highlight the important mistakes and correct choices made at each step of the project shown. The project leader should encourage discussion of the errors and why it is important to avoid them and how the errors came to be in the first place. This is will inform the members of the team on how to handle similar situations and apply these lessons to their own projects in the future. A similar process should occur with the right choices the previous project team made, as current project team members would then be informed on the actions and steps to take instead of the steps taken that led to the difficulties the previous project team made. After this whole process, the manager should remind the team members of the lessons they learned when going over previous projects when applicable to issues the current team comes across. This will not only make for a greater chance that issues are handled in a better way by the current project team, but will also show the team how applicable the lessons they learned are and will implore them to inform others of the same process of looking to past projects for lessons.

(3) Being recently assigned as a project manager, you noticed during the project execution meetings that conflicts have surfaced in the team on both technical and interpersonal levels. What is an appropriate way of handling these conflicts?

Oftentimes, when you talk to people one on one, they reveal much more about what they’re dealing with rather than in groups. Pinpointing the issues and their sources is the first step to coming up with solutions to mitigate them. I personally would address the interpersonal conflicts before the technical conflicts. This is because even if the technical issues are to be solved and over with, if the team cannot put their differences aside for a common goal productivity is lost and the road ahead will be difficult. By solving interpersonal issues first, this allows for members to offer to assist each other if they are in need and offer moral support, letting the team face the technical difficulties together rather than separate. The process by which I would solve these interpersonal conflicts would be to first take each team member aside at different times of the day to check in with them. I would establish a connection such that each member of the team feels comfortable around me and that they can trust me with their complaints and be honest with me. This promotes clarity with each issue brought up and makes sure each member doesn’t hold back any information that could help me understand the situation better. Once this is done, I would bring the members together in a meeting to discuss plans moving forward. I would encourage everyone to be honest with their feelings and, with a member’s consent, expound on how some members feel about certain things or other members in a constructive way so that we can move past the interpersonal conflicts. Then, moving on to technical conflicts, I would once again meet with each member separately and listen to what difficulties each one is having. Depending on the severity of the technical issues, I may ask project sponsors for extra time for training as the previous project manager did not make sure his members were familiar with the technology they’re using. During these individual meetings, I would show each member what role they play within the entire team and how their work contributes to the overall goal. I would assure the team member that I understand their difficulties and depending on how the following weeks progress, I would again ask for extra time from the project sponsor to either give the team member(s) more time to learn or to take on more training to improve their understanding.

(5) According to Bruce Tuckman, which are the stages of team development? How does this relate to Project teams? Are there any more critical than the others? If so, why?

There are five widely accepted stages of team development. In order, they are Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning. Much can be inferenced about the meaning of each stage from each stage’s name. Each stage also has great relevance to project teams. Forming, as one might expect, primarily concerns the process of forming the project team. This includes exchanging names, contact information, and generally getting acquainted. Additionally, during the Forming stage many team members seek authority and leadership and try to get reads on the personality of those around them. It is important for each member of the team to not cause others to get the wrong impression of them and to maximize clarity of motives. This marks the beginning of the project. Next comes the Storming stage where conflict between members and issues with motivation may occur. Project members may have little motivation during this stage since they have not been acquainted with their members for a long time and therefore care little for their fellow members’ success. This stage tests the project team’s resolve and can be tough for teams to get through without much deliberation and conflict. Personalities flare and certain members may take different sides on issues and try to oppose the project leader. Once this stage completes, the team enters the Norming stage where finally the team puts aside their differences and comes to a common understanding of the goal. In this stage productivity increases rapidly and team members begin to synergize well. The team must be careful to maintain this balanced state however, since the team can easily fall back into the Storming stage if the peace is false. If all goes well, the team starts the Performing stage. The Performing stage is a mature form of the Norming stage where the consensus previously formed is unbreakable and there is no mistaking what the goal of each member is. The team becomes a well-oiled machine at this point in its lifetime, with each member committed to moving the team forward to success. Issues that arise are dealt with more constructively and handled with maturity and without the fervor of emotion left behind in the Storming stage. Lastly, the Adjourning stage is the final sendoff for a project team. Many of the goals have been achieved, the project for the most part is a success, if final tasks are wrapped up with the solid teamwork leftover from the Performing stage. At this point, the team may start to break up and disband as less and less people are needed to complete the remaining tasks. Out of all the stages, the Storming stage is usually regarded as the most important for a team to get through. This is primarily due to the many obstacles and conflicts that the team both faces and self-inflicts. It is a test to see if the team can really work as a team and is even worthy of reaching its goals. Completing this stage is often a milestone for the project team and signifies that all personal quarrels are dealt with and the team is ready to fulfill its purpose and work together, making it the most important stage in team development.

(6) At the beginning of project execution, you notice different opinions between team members relating to project work and deliverables and to the level of overall complexity. What should you do to address this?

Whenever there is a difference in opinions in any group, it is a great learning opportunity. Conflicting opinions force each side to consider the opposition’s point and evaluate the same issue at a different perspective than their own. In this situation, I would take each conflicted member aside, separate from the team and to an informal environment to talk about their opinion and personal approach to the issues at hand. I specify informal because informal environments lend themselves to creating more trusting and honest conversations; this will help immensely when talking to a team member about their opinion. After listening to their stance, I will remind them first and foremost about how they are in a team, and communication is key. I will remind them not to get hostile with those who disagree, but instead take the opposition constructively and exhibit some form of response that illustrates to the other person that you understand and are thinking about their point of view. Once this is done with both sides, I will bring the sides together and review what I said to both and ask them to discuss why what we discussed separately is important to the success of the team. After this, I will introduce the subject of conflict, whether it be project work, deliverables, or level of overall complexity, into the discussion and instruct them to use their new or reaffirmed understandings of how to discuss constructively to reach a consensus. If all goes smoothly, the team, although maybe still having differing opinions, will have come to a consensus that makes everyone happy while also accomplishing the goal’s originally set out. If not, I would try to find the source of the disagreement and work from there to see if anything can be done to move the team members beyond being controlled by emotions and to focus on the tasks at hand.

(1) During the execution of a project to build a complex defense system, your team has run into a deep crisis. The project’s goal and objectives have been challenging right from the start, but now you have discovered that your team members have become increasingly unaware of them. Being busy solving detail problems, they often fail to understand the overall requirements. Then they develop solutions which resolve issues in their area of limited responsibility, while causing new problems at the interfaces with other system components. Meanwhile, the team members show signs of growing frustration, and time is running away. How can you help your team in this situation?

The integrity of a defense system is very important to its function, and the overarching goals of its construction should serve as reminders to focus on the bigger picture and give motivation behind a team member’s actions. When the team loses the bigger picture of why they are doing what they are doing, it can cause them to be obsessively focused on minute details and essentially waste time on certain areas that do not need their attention as much as other areas under their jurisdiction of responsibility. This can be very dangerous, as the team can get caught up in semantics and nonessential tasks that hinder the productivity of the project and bring it to a grinding halt. In order to combat this, the simple answer is to remind each member of the exact scope of the project they are working on and the goal they are working towards long term rather than short term. However, this can prove quite difficult since in this situation team members are becoming frustrated with their work, themselves, and possible even others, greatly distracting them from the work they are already wasting their time doing. Also, as these team members solve the problems they deem essential, when in reality they are small in scope, they may create problems in other areas as well as for other members of the team in doing so, creating team-wide issues. All of these issues must first be dealt with in a teamwide meeting to go over each issue separately and how it contributes to halting productivity of the project and threatens the project’s existence. I would go over how nonessential each of the smaller scope issues the team members are currently working on and remind them of the bigger picture and how it relates to or is hurt by their current work. I would make sure not to be condescending during this discussion though as the last thing people working under stress need to hear is negativity. Once we come to a general understanding, and healthy discussion is had between members on how to damage control the current state of the project, I will ask them to go back into their work with a different mindset. I would not stop there; however, as perhaps the bigger picture thinking has not sunk in exactly how I had hoped it had. So in that case, I would then meet separately with the members of the project, much like in the other situations described in previous questions. In these individual meetings, I would ask the other person what they think their role is in the project, and what they are supposed to be working on right now. I would try to make this as informal as possible since the members of the project are dealing with enough stress as it is, and to get them to be as honest and as trusting as possible. Once a healthy back and forth is had, and a deeper understanding of the team member’s role is established and understood, I would let them get back to their work with this fresh mindset. The main idea here is to be understanding rather than mad at the individual for misunderstanding and losing sight of the overarching meaning and purpose behind the project. It can be easy to lose sight of one’s humanity and own ability to misunderstand, and therefore difficult to be understanding of someone else’s. Once I have met with each group member and established an understanding with each of them, I would bring everyone back together and review what we’ve gone over and how to move forward. I would promote any further healthy discussion on what to do going forward, as getting multiple perspectives is never a bad idea. If this fails to work, I would use my team’s immense difficulties to get more time from the project sponsors. I would reassure them that the team can indeed solve the problems, but that time constraints is crushing them in terms of stress and mental pressure, and to alleviate that pressure would help immensely. I would also remind the sponsors, if the subject arises, that firing or getting rid of any of the members right now would be catastrophic to the project since the team would have to add getting to know a new member to their already overflowing list of tasks to accomplish and would just add to the stress the team is feeling.

(3) Rewarding a team member for a job well done or promoting an outstanding employee is easy. Counseling a poor performing employee, addressing a sensitive issue with a peer or trying to find a solution amongst two conflicting project team members is not. The reality is no matter how uncomfortable these conversations can be, we all can relate to being found in them as leaders. The outcome of the difficult conversation all depends on how you handle the discussion. How would you approach this type of conversation? What are some the steps you will follow to ensure a constructive outcome?

I think one of the biggest helpful ideas in situations like these is understanding. If you show the other person, in any situation really, that you understand their viewpoint and where they are coming from not at a surface level, but really deeply understand what they are saying, the person is much more inclined to take help from you or understand what you need out of them. Because most often than not, the person is frustrated or confused and is afraid to seem useless and therefore does not get help so as not to make others sacrifice time on something they think they should be handling themselves. This; however, can be in part avoided by establishing an honest environment early on and letting the project team know that you aren’t interested and stories or answers just to make you happy, but rather only interested in the facts whether they be good or bad. In this situation, counseling a poor performing employee follows a similar line of steps. The project leader must first understand, from the employee themselves, what is causing the poor performance in the first place. If the poor performance is a product of the environment, the project leader should investigate outside factors causing the bad output, such as other employees, external pressure, or the like. If the lack of productivity comes from the employee themselves, the situation becomes more difficult to deal with. This is because the employee could be self-inflicting stress upon themselves thus making it harder to perform, or the employee could simply just not be qualified enough to handle the work given to them. The latter situation can go two ways: the project leader can use this handicap as a way to ask for more time from the project sponsors so that the employee could undergo more training, or the project leader could determine that the project is early enough on to fire the underperforming employee. The latter route is only beneficial if the project leader knows for a fact that a more capable replacement is ready to be put on the team or one can be found in short time. Otherwise, the project leader must bargain for more time from the sponsors to bring the employee up to speed so that the project can be on pace with its goals. If the problem is stress, assuring the employee that there is no danger of their replacement and to let you worry about the time constraints would in theory help. If the stress is more deeply rooted, conversing with the employee and finding the source of their stress and doing everything in your power to help them out would be the best option. If a sensitive issue arises with a peer of yours, depending on the severity your involvement may not be appropriate at all beyond offering moral support and sending condolences. However, if the situation is not as serious as previously described, simply talking with your peer and being understanding of their situation in all aspects of it would definitely help them relieve some stress. In terms of alleviating the actual issue, you can only do so much as situations like these are usually quite personal and up to the person themselves to handle any improvements they need to make to their life. You can offer all the wisdom you like, in a non-condescending way, but there is no feasible way to ensure that the other person will take your advice or even understand it in a way that is useful to them. When two team members are having a conflict, separation is key. Keeping the two together while they are both heated will not lead to anything productive. Talking to each party separately while they’re calm and can understand multiple viewpoints will not only ensure that learning takes place, but also prepare them to regroup with the person they were mad at in a productive way. These situations all relate closely to project teams as when you are a project leader you often must handle issues similar to these in a constructive manner. It is important to be decisive in your choices on how to handle these issues, especially since time is always a factor and you will not get more of it unless you convince your project sponsors to give you more, which is by no means an easy task. Being able to have the communication and tactful people skills necessary to handle issues like these in a short amount of time puts you at that much more of an advantage when managing a project and helps keep the project running smoothly.