

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE – A CASE STUDY ON TEAM MANAGEMENT

It was Tuesday morning and the clock started ticking 11 am, John Gillon looked worried as he skimmed through delivery timeline for various projects in his portfolio. He was wondering how he can ensure smooth deliveries from the “Institutional-Billing” group.

Background:

TeleMeck has been a small but renowned IT services and consulting companies in Telecommunication industry. Its Billing & Payment practice group was headed by a company loyalist John Gillon. Having consulted many telcom companies in US and Europe for more than 20 years, John was known as manager with thorough domain knowledge and hands-on experience of various billing systems and payment processes.

The growth record:

Under John’s leadership, the Billing & Payment Department has grown multi-fold: revenue was tripled and team size has grown from 60 members to 350 resources. Looking at the strong financial performance in past few years and current size of projects in the sales-pipeline, senior management has entrusted John to expand his practice-group.

The sub-practice group:

Thomas McGill joined Billing and Payments department six years ago as a consultant; since then he worked closely with John. Having exhibited high level of commitment, Thomas easily entered into circle of people trusted by John. It was not surprising to see that Thomas got promoted over the years and now as a project manager, he is leading a sub-practice group ‘Institutional-billing’ and in turn a team of thirty people (Direct + Indirect). Sarah, Silton and Jason are directly reporting to Thomas and they in turn, are managing team size of approximately ten members each. Sarah, Silton and Jason shared very good rapport with Thomas.

Project delivery issues:

Though all other things, apparently were looking good, since last couple of years, John Gillon started sensing some problems in the project deliveries. Couple of clients also complained about lack of sound project management practices in his department e.g. A vice president at Erricxen Corporation and a sponsor for couple of projects for ‘Institutional-Billing’, voiced problems regarding stakeholder updates, slippage of delivery schedule, quality audits, etc. John Gillon was aware of these concerns. After consulting his colleagues and senior managers, he concluded that

- His department lacks the expertise in project planning and deliveries. Current team members who have got promoted as project manager were assigned this role purely because department has grown and company needed somebody to manage bigger teams

- His department needed experienced and certified project managers to streamline project management practices and in turn deliveries. These project managers would also guide current team about best practices in project management.

Solution devised:

Hence a year ago, John decided to hire experienced and certified project managers and one such hire was Alex. Alex was certified Project Manager Professional who holds considerable work experience in financial sector. Alex joined 'Institutional-Billing' – the sub-practice group sharing project delivery responsibilities with Thomas. Thus 'Institutional-Billing' has got two project managers. Alex was a experienced project manager but he was not an expert in 'Billing and Payment' in telecom domain.

As couple of months passed, Alex realized that he was not able to get correct information about deliverable, resource utilization, their availability, project plan, actual progress & state of deliverable. Sarah, Siltan and Jason were not sharing complete picture of what their teams were working on, who was working on what, when would they deliver certain deliverable to the client. As Sarah, Siltan and Jason were directly reporting to Thomas, they were not paying much heed to Alex's requests. Alex strongly suspected that Thomas was deliberately preventing his team from sharing/passing on the information. In Alex's opinion, he did not get enough support from the team, which was not listening to him (team reporting to Thomas).

If PMO or John Gilton ask for specific project data, Alex would remain unsure of the inputs he had provided whereas Thomas was able to provide precise details to the same requests. Yet Alex and Thomas's sub-practice-group started facing delivery issues even more prominently – delayed deliveries, increased attrition rate, instances of non-compliance with PMO guidelines.

When Alex complained about these issues to John, John advised him to understand the domain well and indicated that Alex has not been able to tackle team properly. Alex was in a fix, that neither he was well aware of the technology, domain, etc to argue about, in the meeting nor he was able to manage the deliveries properly.

Six months later, the same issue prevailed; despite of the fact that Alex tried hard to break silos. Alex has come to conclusion that he is at a wrong place and he would look out for another job. He even indicated the same to John.

The subsequent events in reality:

Alex escalated issues once more to John that he did not have any power (forget about coercive power) to set new practices which team does not comply/support and merely being catalyst of change is not working any more

John refuted the argument that his team members are not ready to change, and he asked Alex to try his level best to implement project management processes (like documenting planning, ensuring quality and auditing all important processes, etc)

Alex came to conclusion that he is knocking wrong door, he asked for Marna's (John's boss) appointment.

When Alex met Marna and presented his point of views. Marna sensed that current team was resisting new practices Alex was trying to put in place. Till then, Thomas and team were not following standardized processes and delivery was much ad-hoc. Since John has been reporting positive progress and is confident of future business, Marna came do a decision not to interfere with Thomas's decision.

Clearly for Marna, "*If it is not breaking, don't fix it*" was the mantra of moving forward. Hence she decided not to bring organization change to fix it.

but there was no alternate way in TeleMeck; hence he decided to leave TeleMeck & he actually left.

What do you think?

1. Was John's decision to induct two project managers for the 'Institutional-Billing' sub-practice group, correct?

Answer: No

Since the current team lacks the expertise in project planning and deliveries, I understand why John hired an experienced Project Manager Professional as clients complained about the lack of sound project management practices in his department. It's not ideal putting two authorities or leaders on the same project; this can cause a lot of misunderstanding, conflicts, frustration, etc., in the team, especially when it comes to decision making. Due to this, I understand why Thomas' group was not listening to Alex. Thomas's team is used to working with the way how Thomas work. It's hard for them to follow two different leaders' expectations. In addition, the team has a close relationship with Thomas than Alex.

2. Since 'Institutional-Billing' practices needs to be streamlined, what alternate approach would you suggest?

Answer:

I will not say John's approach was completely wrong. However, the way how he handled it is wrong.

The alternate approach I would suggest is, first send the entire team to a seminar or course related to the project they are doing presently. However, I will probably hire Alex if the company can't approve it due to finance, workforce, or the issues that need to be solved quickly. But I must be clear and explain to Alex's responsibilities, and for the time being, he will not be the main lead of the project immediately but assist how to plan and deliver the project efficiently and working together with Thomas and his team. The reason is, I do not want Thomas to feel I do not appreciate him, replacing him, he is not capable with the current project, or he is not doing an excellent job since he has been working with the company and me for many years. Also, Alex can get to know how Thomas and his team, and at the same time, it allows Thomas and his team to get to know Alex. Depending on the outcomes (the duration time where Alex and Thomas work together), and if the result is positive, maybe in the future, the team can be split into two to lighten the burden of the project's workload. When this happens, John should talk to Alex and Thomas about what they've learned from each other and, from there, implement a new efficient way of working on planning and delivering the project.

3. If you were at Alex's place, how differently would you handle the situation?

Answer:

If John offered me to become the main lead of the project, I would not accept it immediately. Instead, I will propose if I can work with the team together. In this way, I can get to know Thomas and the team better in working and start to bond with them. As time goes by, I believe trust between myself and the team grows, and we can work together efficiently. If that doesn't work, I will have to speak to Sarah, Silton, Jason, and Thomas individually to find out the problem and see if the problem can be solved. Given that the outcome is still negative, I will talk to John if it's possible to move me to another project and have my own team. When it's still doesn't work, then I will resign.