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Leverage Communication Diversity in creating High Performing Project Teams

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Project Management Leadership – Harmony in Diversity & Millennial Generation

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Abstract:
Working in teams brings in lot of challenges, as the team comprises of different individuals bringing in diversity in various forms. Each individual's communication preference is different. This is an additional factor adding to the different forms of diversity existing within the team. Managing communication diversity is one of the vital factor for project leaders to succeed in the corporate world. It becomes very important for project leaders to develop and refine this skill. This paper would focus on communication assessment tools which would help us to understand different communication style preferences of team members and how project leaders can tune their communication. Teams can experience an increase in morale and productivity if project leaders are able to communicate effectively across all levels in the organization. This paper would also suggest techniques in form of case studies, on how to understand different styles and apply appropriate strategies, for effective project leadership and create high performing teams.

Intent: (Mandatory)
This paper will cover the importance of communication diversity in teams, and how project leaders and teams can use it for team's success. This also gives information about communication and personality assessment tools available and how one can use it to tune or adapt their communication, to create high performance project teams.

Contents

Introduction

Communication is an integral component of success for any team. It can either make or break teams, and is the biggest reason for project success or failure. Effective communication within team and with stakeholders is essential. It improves relationships, and creates mutual trust. Project managers to effectively manage many projects, require strong interpersonal skills in addition to technical, project management and conceptual skills. Every person is different with different communication styles. This sets their communication preferences. This creates a need for project managers and project leaders to understand different styles, and frame their communication in a way that effectively reaches all stakeholders. This would provide valuable outputs such as increased trust, commitment to team goals, increased knowledge sharing, and ultimately create high performing project teams.

High Performance Teams and Communication

A high performance team is an ideal team that harnesses individual skills and abilities for team's success. Here the team capabilities exceed those of its most talented member. Teams are very common structure preferred in most of the organizations. Teams come together to address complex problems, accomplish tasks and meeting challenging goals.

Successful teams share several defining characteristics:

1. Everyone on the team talks and listens in roughly equal measure, keeping contributions short and sweet
2. Members face one another, and their conversations and gestures are energetic
3. Members connect directly with one another not just with the team leader
4. Members carry on back-channel or side conversations within the team
5. Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back

Team's functioning is dependent upon the communicative relationships among team members within that team because these relationships facilitate the dissemination of critical information and expertise that enables high performance.

With more virtual teams [1], where they rarely interact face to face, importance of communication is even more pronounced. Rapid technological advancements as well as changing global demands over the past two decades have changed the nature of work within organizations. Advances in communication technology have allowed organizations to become more flexible, as employees can conduct work from home and even communicate across remote geographical distances. One major advantage of such a process is that it allows organizations to leverage diverse skills and abilities that are unlikely to be found in one location.

Effective team management is one of the key factors that allow companies to tackle the challenges of today's demanding business environment. Communication is one of the key aspect for effective team management. The 9th Global project management survey shows that 30% of failures are because of

inadequate/ poor communication, as depicted in Figure 1. This is based on responses from 3234 project management practitioners and these results have been published in 2017 pulse of the profession report.

Q: Of the projects started in your organization in the past 12 months that were deemed failures, what were the primary causes of those failures? (Select up to three.)
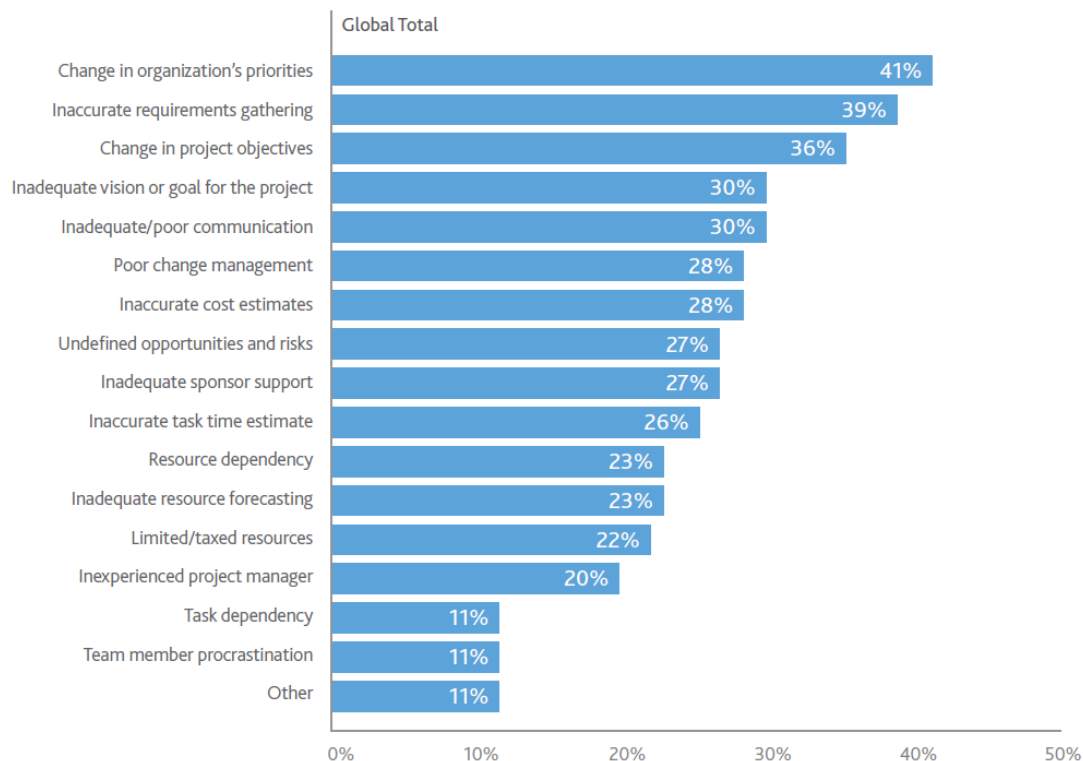
Global Total

Cause	%
Change in organization's priorities	41%
Inaccurate requirements gathering	39%
Change in project objectives	36%
Inadequate vision or goal for the project	30%
Inadequate/poor communication	30%
Poor change management	28%
Inaccurate cost estimates	28%
Undefined opportunities and risks	27%
Inadequate sponsor support	27%
Inaccurate task time estimate	26%
Resource dependency	23%
Inadequate resource forecasting	23%
Limited/taxed resources	22%
Inexperienced project manager	20%
Task dependency	11%
Team member procrastination	11%
Other	11%

Figure 1: Causes of project failures [2]

Project managers accomplish work through the project team and other stakeholders. Effective project managers require a balance of technical, interpersonal and conceptual skills that help them analyze situations and interact appropriately. A successful project manager should be able to complement the technical skills with other interpersonal skills such as,

- Leadership
- Team building
- Motivation
- Communication
- Influencing
- Decision making
- Political and cultural awareness
- Negotiation
- Trust building
- Conflict management
- Coaching

We see that communication is a major component for team's success. Openness in communication is a gateway to teamwork and high performance. It improves relationships among project team members and creates mutual trust.

To communicate effectively, the project manager should be aware of the communication styles of other parties, cultural nuances/norms, relationships, personalities, and the overall context of the situation. Awareness of these factors leads to mutual understanding and thus to effective communication. Project managers should identify various communication channels, understand what information they need to provide, what information they need to receive, and which interpersonal skills will help them communicate effectively with various project stakeholders. Understanding communication styles can help to plan the communication with appropriate sensitivity to relationships and cultural differences.

Communication Diversity in Teams

There are different forms of diversity which exist in teams such as race, age, gender, nationality, culture, color, ethnicity, etc. If we go deep into each of these forms, the one major component which can play a part in team working is the communication aspect. Most of these types of diversity reflect finally in the form of communication differences, as depicted in Figure 2. We need to maximize and capitalize on workplace diversity, by adapting our style to the environment where we are in.
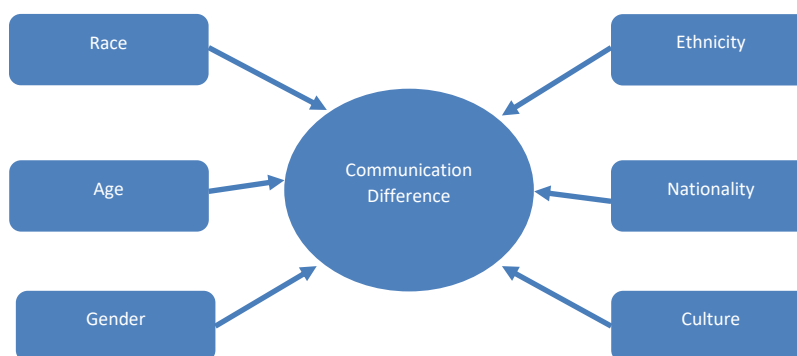

Figure 2: Diversity in Teams and effect

Team members can be different in many ways. Diversity can be seen in demographics, color, gender, age, informational differences, education, experience, values and culture. As per research, people from diverse backgrounds might actually alter the behavior of a group's social majority in ways that led to improved and more accurate group thinking. Diverse teams are more likely to constantly reexamine facts and remain objective. They may also encourage greater scrutiny of each member's actions, keeping their joint cognitive resources sharp and vigilant. By breaking up workplace homogeneity, you can allow your employees to become more aware of their own potential biases, entrenched ways of thinking that can otherwise blind them to key information and even lead them to make errors in decision-making processes. The scientists think that diverse teams may outperform homogenous ones in decision making because they process information more carefully [3].

Communication challenges are the most prominent in diverse teams. Diverse teams can be very successful, if the challenge of communication is appropriately handled.

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Communication assessment tools

Each person's communication styles is different. We need to understand these differences, to make our communication effective. There are many tools available to assess our communication strength. Understanding of our own strength is foremost important. These tools give us what our strengths are. When project leaders use these tools to understand the communication preferences of team members, they can tune their communication to suit the needs of all members in the team. A summary of some of the tools available are given below:

Assessment tool	Report includes
Forte Communication Style [4]	The Forté report is a robust, highly accurate communication style report, used globally for over 30-years for personal development at all levels and sizes of organizations. It shares the "who" you are, increasing self-awareness, how you are currently adapting to your environment and how you are "most likely" coming across to others. Based on this profile it then gives you a communications strategy that will strengthen workplace communication and performance.
DISC profile [5]	The DiSC profile is a non-judgmental tool used for discussion of people's behavioral differences. The DiSC model provides a common language that people can use to better understand themselves and adapt their behaviors with others. DISC refers to the four behavior types the test assesses: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance.
Myers Briggs Type Indicator [6]	Taking the test results in identification and description of the 16 distinctive personality types that result from the interactions among the preferences. The 16 types are based on 4 dichotomies – Favorite world, Information, Decision, and Structure.
Primary colors personality test [7]	Uses the artists color wheel which uses six primary colors: Red/Purple/Blue/Green/Yellow/Orange. The personality tendencies used in one context, say 'me at work' might be very different than the personality tendencies a person used in another context. Primary Colors Personality Test, while extremely simple and sticky is the perfect tool for helping clients gain fast, effective and accurate insight into who they are in different contexts of their lives, as well as, what personality tendencies they revert to when stressed, frustrated and angry.
John Maxwell leadership assessment [7]	The assessment measures 64 attributes that measure an individual on the attributes that help leaders have success at each level
Strength Finder [7]	A more modern test created by Gallup and championed by Marcus Buckingham, Strength Finder focuses at your strengths. The test identifies your top 5 strengths out of a possible 34. Accompanied with a relevant modern philosophy. This test is more prescriptive on proactive strategy.
Wealth Dynamics [7]	Created eight years ago by Roger James Hamilton, a social entrepreneur and founder of XL Nation. It links both your strengths and weaknesses to your preferences, and then gives you clear role models and strategies to follow.

Adapting Communication based on Styles

Communication diversity helps to come up with different ideas and different perspectives for problem solving. The success lies in adapting different styles based on situation. Communication diversity is an integral part of teams. Teams who make use of this, gets good results. Each person prefers different

styles of communication, and this will lead them to look into different information. As a Team leader, we need to utilize this strength for the benefit of the team. Another important aspect is to support in the adaptability of the team members.

Decision on what tool to use is solely based on organizational and business requirement. Two of the tools are discussed below, to show how it can be used for better communication.

Tool 1 Example:

Forte uses the following 4 pairs of styles to give a good understanding of communication style. The four pair of styles used in Forte are: Dominance/ Non-Dominance, Extrovert/ Introvert, Patient/ Impatient, Conformist/ Nonconformist. The combination of the 4 styles depict a person's overall communication pattern.

Table 1: Styles and adaptability - Tool 1

Style	Dealing with different styles
Dominant: Decisive, competitive, risk taker, wanting to get things done	Appreciates being included in the decision making process [8]
Non Dominant: Congenial, cautious, calculated risk taker, interested in getting input from others before making decision	Contributors should be taking it seriously in a decision making process [8]
Extrovert: Outgoing, friendly, optimistic, persuasive	A little excitement and verbal examples of thinking will help [9]
Introvert: private, quiet, introspective, serious, reserved in social situations	Keeping communication short and to the point works [9]
Patient: Easy going, dependable, relaxed	Need time to think things over and come up with the best answer [10]
Impatient: Hasty, quick-witted, intense, change-oriented	Goals and objectives need to be clear [10]
Conformist: Expected to be disciplined, dedicated, precise, devoted	Processes, procedures needs to be clear and followed [11]
Nonconformist: Independent, free-thinkers, unconcerned about tried and true ways, more concerned with the big picture	Discussing on the big picture, critical information sharing [11]

Tool 2 Example:

DiSC uses the four main categories to analyze personality and behavior. The combination of the four styles gives complete description of a person's behavior.

Table 2: Styles and adaptability - Tool 2

Style	Dealing with different styles
Dominance: Person places emphasis on accomplishing results, the bottom line, confidence	Make sure communication is brief and to the points, respect their need for autonomy [5]
Influence: Person places emphasis on influencing or persuading others, openness, relationships	Approach informally, conversation light [5]
Steadiness: Person places emphasis on co-operation, sincerity, dependability	Clear expectations and timelines, precise and focused communication [5]

Conscientiousness: Person places emphasis on quality, accuracy, expertise, competency	How things will be done, sincere appreciation, show their importance in the organization [5]

Case study on styles

Team Scenario

X is appointed as the Project Leader of a critical program. He reports into Y, who is in a different location. Project Leader has team members A, B, C, D, and E directly reporting to him. The team was in the forming stage, and entering into the storming stage.
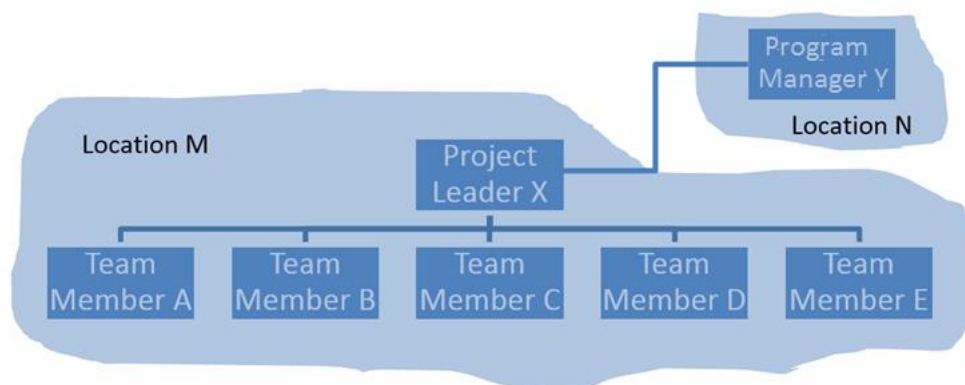

Figure 3: Team structure for case study

Issues noticed

Scenario 1: Project Leader X reports into Program Manager Y at a different location. They have interacted through conference calls and skype. They have not met each other in person. X has newly joined the team. Y was frustrated with the interactions with X. The focus for both differed, and they were not able to come to decision on certain issues.

Scenario 2: Project Leader X noticed that in his team meetings, C was very silent and not contributing to the meeting. E was not able to get what project leader was saying.

Scenario 3: A is very energetic, likes to handle multiple tasks at a time. Project leader could see that this particular team member sometimes misses out on certain tasks. A would also argue with X when a constructive feedback was provided. A would ask for the facts/data behind the feedback. B is very thorough and take one task at a time, and sometimes there was delay.

Scenario 4: Project Leader X regularly communication to the stakeholders via emails, project gate reviews and team meetings. In any of these communications, he found that few were dissatisfied. Some of them would come back with questions. Gate reviews posed a bigger challenge as each of the review committee members had very different expectations.

Scenario 5: Project Leader sends out an activity plan to all the team members. Some team members were clear and some were not clear on the communication.

Issue analysis

Project Leader needed help. Project wanted to quickly move his team from the storming stage. X took advantage of the communication assessment tool from the organization. X, Y and all his team members did a self-analysis of their communication style and shared it with each other. Then each of them were able to understand the reasons for the misunderstanding.

Scenario 1: Both X and Y had different ways of decision making, which they understand from the analysis. This helped both of them to get rid of the negative perceptions they had.

Scenario 2: X understood that C was an introvert, and would like to think through before speaking in the meeting. X also realized that C didn't have adequate prior information to contribute in the meeting. He also realized that E was a big picture oriented person, and E was not able to connect his tasks to the business or the organization.

Scenario 3: X also understood that A wants a fast paced work, and can easily get bored with the routine activities. A likes to handle multiple things with lots of variety. He also understood A would focus on details and facts and very process oriented person. On the other side, B wants to focus on one job at a time, and would like to do a thorough work on that.

Scenario 4: X's small group of his team members, had huge communication differences. He realized that the major problems in the project reviews by the review committee could be because of the communication style differences. He went on to think what could be done in this situation.

Scenario 5: X after analyzing the style differences found that different styles look for different information in the communication – 'what, why, who, when, where, how'. He changed his communication the next time which covered most of these questions. He found that all the team members of different styles were clear with his message.

On analyzing the team requirement, X found that a team get together is essential. The team shared their communication preferences with each. They also understood the motivators and de-motivators of each other. The team also shared lots of feedback with each other, both positive and constructive.

Improvement Actions taken by team

Team after analysis of the different styles within them, together came up with some additions to their existing team norms:

1) They took away few minutes of their regular weekly meetings with the offshore person for getting-to-know each other
2) Developed an induction presentation to new members joining their team, connecting the team responsibilities to the project goal, and linkage to the organization and business goal
3) The team had a common priority tasks list. They initiated daily meetings to prioritize each one's work and also decide on the timelines for completion and support required
4) They also kept aside few minutes in the team meetings, to appreciate people
5) They agreed to give and receive constructive feedback at the appropriate time to benefit each other

Conclusion

This paper discussed about how communication is an important aspect of high performing teams, and the tools available to leverage this untapped communication diversity. Project Leaders can make a big difference to teams by understanding different communication styles and appropriately tuning their

communication. This also needs to be aided with listening. Good communication starts with good listening, to both verbal and non-verbal indicators.

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