



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Managing High-Performing Project Teams

Have you ever been on a project team that had everything going right? The team members all got along. They all had the right skills. They all worked hard and pulled together to get the project done.

Those are just some of the characteristics of a high-performing team. In addition to managing the work associated with the project, the Project Manager is also responsible for building and leading a team that is as effective and efficient as possible. To some Project Managers, this is the toughest part of the job. You may have known Project Managers that were very organized, were strong technically, and were masters of project management processes and techniques. Unfortunately, they were not very good people managers and were not very effective at building a team. In many cases, being very good at the process side of managing projects will be good enough to get a project completed on time. But if the project is very lengthy, and if the project team is large, good people management and team-building skills are essential to success as well. In fact, all of your projects will be more successful if you can manage the processes and also build a strong team.

There are many aspects of building a high-performance team that require some period of time to bring to fruition. You will find that teams that have not worked together before usually go through four stages, as defined in the Tuckman model. They are:

- **Forming** - getting together, learning about each other
- **Storming** - thrashing, personality conflicts, uncertainty, feeling comfortable enough to argue, not sure what you are doing
- **Norming** – getting used to each other's strengths and weaknesses, starting to rely on each other, feeling camaraderie as a team
- **Performing** - focused on the common objectives, relying on each other, solving problems within the team, working independently as a team

Team members of a high-performance team have trust and confidence in the other members of the team. You do not build trust overnight, so it may not be possible to create a high-performance team on a project that is four weeks long. On the other hand, if this same group of people typically staff smaller projects over a longer period of time, then there are opportunities to build this type of team.

As with other aspects of project management, creating a high-performance team is a topic that can cover a book or an entire class by itself. However, this document describes some of the characteristics of a high-performing team and some of the ways that a Project Manager can facilitate their forming.

Characteristics of a High-Performance Team



TenStep Supplemental Paper

As you would expect, there are many great characteristics of a high-performing team. They include:

- **Common objectives** - The team understands why it has been formed and what the expectations are of it. The members know the objectives of the project and the deliverables that must be built to achieve the objectives. All of their work activities are aligned to the completion of deliverables to satisfy the project objectives.
- **Good internal processes** - The high-performing team has a set of internal processes that guide how members act and react in particular circumstances. For instance, if problems arise, they know how to invoke issues management. If a customer makes a request for a change to specifications, they know to invoke scope change procedures. In this way, they maintain as little uncertainty and thrashing as possible. Another aspect of these teams is that they constantly look for ways to improve their current processes. If a process was perfect a year ago, it may not be perfect today. The team constantly challenges the current state and recommends changes for improvement.
- **Hard work** - This probably goes without saying. High-performing teams find the challenge associated with their work and work hard to complete their assignments within expectations. Sometimes, hard working gets confused with working a lot of hours. These are not the same things. A high-performance team works efficiently and works smart. Members get more work done in a typical day than their counterparts. (In fact, a team that must pull late hours all the time probably has some problems with focus that might need to be addressed to get them out of that rut). On the other hand, the high-performing team understands when members need to pull together to achieve the project objectives, and sometimes that does require working many extra hours.
- **Focus** - The team is focused on the objectives and the deliverables, and understands how to achieve them.
- **High motivation** - The team finds the challenge associated with meeting their objectives and completing their deliverables. This is both a self-motivation on the part of each team member as well as a reinforced motivation among the entire team.
- **Highly Organized** - Team members understand what their role on the team is, and what everyone else's role is as well. People understand the work that they have on their plate today, as well as what the remainder of their work is. They understand the processes and procedures needed to run the project smoothly, including scope change management, risk management, issues management, quality management, and status reporting. If unusual events occur, they know how to manage the process and how to escalate when appropriate.
- **Balanced skill sets** - A high-performance team has all of the skills needed to complete the project. They have the skills needed from a technical standpoint, as well as the right set of role-based skills. For instance, it is hard to be a high-performance team when everyone wants to be the Project Manager or team leader. If some of these people are asked to build the deliverables instead, they may not have the right skills or the right motivation for the team to be successful. If short-term skill sets are



TenStep Supplemental Paper

missing, then the appropriate skills are brought in from outside resources if needed. If the skill will be needed on the team in the long-term, then team members receive the training necessary to perform the work in the future.

- **Good team interaction** - The members of high-performance teams typically genuinely get along with each other. They have mutual respect for each other and trust that the others are working as hard as they are. They assist other team members when they are in need and understand that the team members will do the same for them if needed. In general, the team members are even-tempered and not prone to high ecstasy or depression. The team members respect each other's abilities as well as help compensate for any weaknesses, since they know others are compensating for their weaknesses as well.

The Role of the Project Manager

The Project Manager is the one with the responsibility to take a group of individuals and mold them into a high-performing team. It is not a process that takes place overnight. If it were, every team would be high-performing, instead of the one or two that you may have worked on in your entire career. In general, the Project Manager should be doing the following types of things.

- **Establish team processes** - The team needs to have good processes to follow for handling issues, change requests, status reporting, etc. They need to understand how things get approved, how to surface potential risks and what deliverables should look like. Most of these processes should be established when the project is first started. If possible, these processes should be consistent throughout the organization. If no consistent processes are available for the entire organization, then they entire team can work and agree on them when the project is first starting.
- **Invest in training** - In a perfect world, the Project Manager and the entire team would have experience in the technology being utilized and in the subject matter being delivered. Members should know the organization and the politics. In the real world, the Project Manager and the project team rarely have all the right skills needed. However, they need to understand what they do not know and try to get to the right level of expertise as quickly as possible. This usually implies being as liberal with training as possible at the beginning of the project. This includes technical, professional, and business training. Also, consider specific team building and other training designed to show a team how to work effectively together. This can compress the time required to reach the higher levels of team performance.
- **Be flexible** – It is hard to know and plan everything before the project starts. One of the key characteristics of a successful Project Manager is to be comfortable working in an environment where change is a constant. If the Project Manager works effectively in this environment, then the workload will be updated on a continuous basis and will accurately reflect what needs to be done to complete the project. He or she is also able to effectively deal with changing team dynamics over time.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

- **Monitor team dynamics and progress** - Once the team is in place and well trained, it should be monitored to make sure the team members are progressing well and moving toward a state of higher efficiency and effectiveness. The Project Manager should constantly reinforce good behaviors and deal with problems when they occur. (When the team is really high performing, you will find that they tend to deal with their own problems before they are surfaced outside the team.)

Summary

High-performing teams sometimes come about by the accidental coming together of the right people with the right motivation. However, the Project Manager can go a long way toward building a high-performing team, or he or she can shorten the time it takes to build that sort of team. If the Project Manager steps back, he or she can define the characteristics of a high performing team and make an effort to duplicate those conditions on his or her current team. You need to recognize that this is not an overnight process. Even if the team is motivated, many of the characteristics of a high performing team need to evolve as people become comfortable working with each other. The Project Manager can guide the team through the various stages of team dynamics and help them reach the final state more quickly than if they were left on their own.