

Clique or Team? A Fine Line Indeed

By Kwei Akuete, PMP

In his article titled “Nix the Spreadsheet” (*PM Network*, 2004), Tom Peters emphasizes that “managers must direct more of their efforts toward studying the overall corporate picture and performing the role project managers were made to perform—bringing people together in *teams* to solve problems and realize projects.” This is very true indeed. However, managers must be careful not to form a clique while attempting to form a team.

When putting a team together, every astute and objective coach or manager looks to combine the best skills, talents and abilities that he or she feels will yield the desired results. Sometimes this objective goes awry, as was recently demonstrated in the case of Terrell Owens, a former wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles football team; personality

who doesn’t; which people work well together and which ones do not. These project factors, when reviewed during and after a project, tend to crystallize in the manager’s mind to indicate which team members he would like to have on a subsequent project to yield the same or better results.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach. This is not only indicative of human nature—that generally people are creatures of habit and resist change—but also very smart, because it minimizes the risk of failure. The problem arises when managers, in the hopes of sustaining a winning streak of successful projects or having formed bonds with certain team members, continue to staff the same people for future projects. This could be a detrimental approach in the long term.

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conflicts with the star quarterback and other teammates became irresolvable.

Incidents such as these can have a positive side-effect: They remind coaches and managers alike that chemistry—in addition to or more important than talent—is a critical factor to be considered for effective team performance. Also, the right mix of people that came together to produce the desired results in the past may not be the right ones needed to produce great results in the future, even in similar situations.

Lessons Learned

Experienced project managers who have led failed or even successful projects learn a number of lessons during their career: namely, what works and what doesn’t; who works and

“Iceberg!!!”

Unfortunately, this warning cry from Titanic passengers was only audible to movie watchers, but this need not be the case for project members. Some of the key warning signs or pitfalls that program and project managers need to watch for when forming teams are:

- Perception of a clique
- Perception of unwelcome new team members
- Contribution fatigue

Perception of a Clique

As noted earlier, a familiarity with habits and work styles develops between a project manager and project members. If the “partnership” (i.e., the same project team) moves from

project to project, that familiarity may tend to evolve into bonds of mutual respect and admiration, perhaps even friendship. Nothing wrong with that, right? Right.

The problem starts along these lines: If other project managers and fellow consultants see that group as always working together and it appears to be a cohesive unit, the project team may then be referred to as “John’s group” or “Michelle’s group.” Although it may simply be a well-functioning team that has performed well on successful projects, others may form the opinion—subconsciously or not—that this team is now a clique.

Perception of Unwelcome New Team Members

The prevailing opinion that a project manager has formed a clique may be tolerable if there is success. It becomes unsupportable if that team stays together for an extended period of time with no new team members or is associated with one or more project failures *and* continues to stay together. This brings about more vocal charges such as, “That’s So and So’s Fan Club,” or “They’re just a bunch of ‘yes’ men and women and that’s why they failed.” At this point, surely

is only a matter of time before contribution fatigue sets in to drain the life from the project.

Contribution fatigue may also result from one or more of these additional factors:

- Over-familiarity with other team members’ habits, work styles and ideas
- Boredom due to performing the same role on multiple projects
- Lack of new team members with new energy and new ideas
- Low morale due to bad press.

Even if the end date of the project is far away, the project may still be in jeopardy if one or more of these factors is present within a project team.

Stack the Deck

Project success is never assured even with the best planning. However, just as a project manager does everything to ensure success by addressing the foundational elements of a project (e.g., schedule, risk identification) the same care must be

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any coach would call a timeout, make a substitution and call a new play! Right?

Sometimes what seems so logical to the outsider, and perhaps even to the coach, doesn’t happen. This compounds the opinion that “John’s group” does not welcome new team members and with them, new ideas. If John does not remove some current team members in favor of new ones, especially after some failed attempts, he limits the introduction of new energy and ideas. John is now restricted to the same range of limited problem-solving approaches applied to previous successful and unsuccessful projects. His chances to improve the team’s performance, enhance or salvage the team’s reputation, and yield better project results are reduced or lost.

Contribution Fatigue

There can be no doubt that the receipt of these charges by any team would result in decreased morale. Once morale wanes, it

taken to assemble a team with the right chemistry along with the best skills, talents and abilities. By doing so, new and old team members see a level playing field rather than favoritism. Project members perform better and contribute new and fresh ideas so that projects have an even better chance for success. Stack the deck in your favor: Diversify your team to increase your chances of program or project success.

Reference

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About the Author

Kwei Akuete, PMP, is a management consultant with 10 years of professional experience. His areas of expertise are in project management and process improvement. Mr. Akuete has also conducted risk/issue management, policy and gap analysis, organizational policy development, and implementation for several U.S. Federal agencies and private-sector clients.