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Project Team
Member
Performance

Project Team Member Performance

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Introduction

The question of how a project manager (PM) working in a functional or matrix organizational structure gets team members to perform is asked in almost every project management class I have taught. This is true for both my roles as an independent contractor and as a full-time professional skills instructor for Global Knowledge for the last 15 years.

Almost all organizational internal projects are performed in some form of functional, weak matrix, or balanced matrix organizational structure. This means that project team members report to a functional manager who controls their assignments, performance appraisals, raises, bonuses, etc. Until recently, PMs had little input into any of these processes. Therefore, the question stated in the first paragraph comes up very often.

What PMI® Says

My first suggestion for PMs who find themselves in this situation is to review what the Project Management Institute (PMI) has to say about the authority of a PM. This can be found on pages 283 and 284 in *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)—Fifth Edition*. The *PMBOK® Guide* suggests that PMs use a combination of technical, personal, and connectional skills to interact appropriately with and manage project team members. The three interpersonal skills that PMI writes about are:

1. **Leadership** (increases respect and esteem), which includes:
   - Social influence – PMs have the ability to affect project team members' emotions, opinions, and behavior. PMs can use social influence in many ways, such as conformity, socialization, peer pressure, obedience, and persuasion to influence project team members to perform.
   - Building a vision – PMs must be able to see end results. PMs can't give direction on the project journey without knowing the specific destination.
   - Setting a direction – PMs can articulate simply and clearly where the team is going—and provide guidance on how to get there.
   - Inspiring – PMs need to make things happen. Inspiring can take several forms, such as making people want to do things, filling people with the urge to do things, and giving ideas about doing something.
   - Coaching/Motivating – PMs can coach/motivate others. They can provide training/development to project team members by supporting them in achieving common project goals. PMs can share experiences, offer advice, give guidance, and share their expertise.
   - Aid and support of others – PMs must provide aid and support for project team members in their efforts to achieve common project goals. This sends the message that achievement of the common goals can only be accomplished by a TEAM effort. PMs support project team members, and project team members support PMs.
   - Accomplishment of common goals – PMs set goals that are observable and have measurable end results. Goals can have one or more objectives to be achieved within a fixed time frame. This gives project team members a sense of belonging.
   - Guides and directs others – PMs will lead the team, in effect guiding others on a journey to an unknown destination. PMs will show and explain what, when, where, and how. PMs provide leadership, direction, and advice.

2. **Influencing** (increases respect and esteem), which includes:
   - Ability to be persuasive – PMs can persuade, a process used to change attitudes toward an event by using written or spoken word. This can be done to convey information, feelings, reasoning, or a combination of all of these.
   - Ability to clearly articulate points/positions – PMs must express ideas simply, clearly, and effectively in easy to understand terms.
   - Using active/effective listening – PMs should fully concentrate on what is being said rather than just "hearing" the message of the speaker. In concentration, the PM will receive the real meaning of the conversation. This can be used to show regard for the speaker, which will aid in developing good relations with project team members.
   - Awareness/Consideration of other positions – PMs must make themselves aware of and give proper consideration to points brought up by other project team members. In doing so, the PM sends the message that he or she respects the project team members' opinions and that their input will be taken into account when making decisions. This will help increase team cohesion.
   - Addressing important issues – PMs must use their ability to sort out important issues from chaos and the unimportant. When the project team sees this ability, it increases their respect and esteem for the PM.
   - Ability to reach agreements – PMs will negotiate with everyone, including team members. PMs will have to use their ability to reach accords (with people from different perspectives) to arrive at agreements. This includes project team members.

3. **Effective decision making** (increases respect and esteem), which includes:
   - Identify and clarify the issue.
   - Determine the nature of the issue and break it into smaller pieces.
   - Formulate questions, gather data, and turn it into information.
   - Collate/organization/condense/summarize information and use it effectively.
   - Brainstorm and use lateral thinking to determine the ideal way to resolve the issue as if time and resources were not a constraint.
   - Decide if additional information would significantly help the solution.
   - Consider all of the alternatives; choose the one that closely matches the ideal solution.
   - Implement the decision; check on how well the chosen solution solved the issue.
   - Meanwhile, you the PM will have to:
     – Successfully negotiate with project team members – see #2 above.
     – Successfully influence project team members – see #2 above.

When team members see the PM using a well-documented, proven, and transparent approach, their respect and esteem for the PM will increase.

PM Authority

The above three interpersonal skills can be reinforced by PM authority, which comes from one or more of the following sources:

1. Legitimate or Formal – The fact that your name, as the project manager, is spelled out in a project charter. Your authority is further reinforced by the fact the project charter is signed by a sponsor, who is in senior management. This gives you legitimate or formal authority to make decisions, consume resources, give approvals, and assign work.
2. Reward – If you have the ability, or it is perceived that you have the ability, to pass out or allow rewards such as time off, flexible working hours, bonuses, etc., then this gives you some amount of power over people. This is the opposite of penalty.

3. <u>Penalty</u> – If you have the ability, or it is perceived that you have the ability, to pass out penalties or inflict unpleasant consequences, then this gives you power over people. This is the opposite of reward.
4. <u>Expert</u> – This is an earned authority. It is based on the perception that you are the expert PM in the organization. This could also include technical or project management expertise.
5. <u>Reverence</u> – Authority inferred to the PM from one or more sources, such as:
   - Being well liked.
   - Having charisma.
   - Receiving support from higher authority.
   - Having team members' respect.
6. <u>Representative</u> – Authority that is granted to an individual. In this case, the group chooses to give the PM the authority to lead them.

When all is said and done, the ultimate penalty and consequence for a project team member's poor performance is being kicked off the project team. In most organizations, a PM has the authority to kick a project team member off the project team, and it's the strongest tool a PM has. This action should only be used after the PM has exhausted all other means to achieve standard performance from a project team member and the poor performance has been documented and vetted by HR. Remember, the other project team members are aware of the poor-performing project team member. Doing nothing about a poor-performing project team member is not an option. The other project team members are expecting you as the PM to do something about the situation. If you do not, the message you send to the other project team members is that there are no consequences for poor performance. This is not a message you want to send.

When you execute the kickoff, a couple of things will happen:

1. The message you send to other members of the team is that there are consequences for poor performance.
2. The message you send to other organizational members is that there are consequences for poor performance.

Be aware that the poor-performing project team member when reporting back to their functional manager will blame you, the PM, for what has happened to them on the project. But, at some point in the near future, the functional manager and you will have a discussion about the kickoff, and your story and the poor-performing project team member's story will be quite different. At that point, the ball is in the functional manager's court.

Conclusion
Project managers do have tools to demand performance, even in functional and matrix organizational structures.

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About the Author

William (Bill) J. Scott is a Professional Engineer (PE), Program Management Professional (PgMP), and Project Management Professional (PMP) who has specialized in large, complex, long-term, and constructed environmental project work for electric utilities and heavy industry. Bill has more than 35 years of experience in engineering, managing projects, and project-related businesses. For the last 14 years, he has worked as a project and professional skills consultant and trainer.