

## Program Management Commentary<sup>1</sup>

### Senior Management Enablers for Distributed Project Teams

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In our last article we touched on the practices and capabilities that help drive participation, collaboration and integration in a highly distributed team. This article will focus more generally on some key organizational enablers that enhance the probability of success for the team working in a global or highly distributed environment. These enablers are owned and driven for the most part by the organization's senior management.

As pointed out by Hildenbrant & Brandi in a recent white paper, "Global Project Management Enablers", *"the project oriented company has high project maturity and provides the framework that enables the global project team to work optimally. Project maturity is the measure of both how competent the organization is in practicing project management and how the balance of power is between the project organization and the line organization"*.<sup>1</sup> This need for balance of course, raises the need to clarify the need for empowering the project team so that responsibility and authority is appropriately understood across the organizational management structure.

#### **Team Empowerment**

The nature of highly distributed teams is that they are dispersed across multiple geographical sites. This creates a complex management situation whereby the team needs to work and manage across numerous functional organization boundaries. Successful project-based organizations proactively address this complex situation by clarifying roles and responsibilities between project leaders and line management leaders.

This is necessary to ensure that project leaders are empowered with the appropriate level of decision-making authority that is necessary to effectively manage the project resources required to meet the business and operational objectives that they are assigned by senior management. These roles and responsibilities need to be well communicated to all groups within an organization that are vested in the success of a

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<sup>1</sup> The *Program Management Commentary* series includes articles by Russ Martinelli, Tim Rahschulte and Jim Waddell, principle consultants at the Program Management Academy. The authors have extensive experience working on international programs in technology industries, and are the authors of *Leading Global Project Teams* and *Program Management for Improved Business Results*. More information at [www.programmanagement-academy.com](http://www.programmanagement-academy.com)

project so that they understand who has responsibility and authority for managing the project resources.

### ***Formal Escalation Process***

When elements of the firm's organization are dispersed across multiple geographical sites, an important process that is needed for project teams is a formalized escalation process. Many times, major barriers need to be addressed and decisions made that are outside the scope and authority of the project team leader. If there is no established policy for addressing these issues, especially across a physically separated team and operational management, then serious delays to the completion of a project will be encountered. This can be proactively addressed by senior management outlining the targets, requirements and conditions when it is necessary to elevate important issues rapidly so that they are addressed without delay.

### ***Effective Tools Strategy***

The primary role of technology in the distributed team environment is one of overcoming the challenges created by time and distance. The senior management team of a highly distributed organization should invest in electronic tools that best meet the needs of their distributed teams.

Many times large investment in communication and collaboration tools have failed to pay for themselves because the technology was initially selected based on false financial estimates of productivity gains or because of pressures to implement technology solutions used by industry leaders, rather than selecting tools that integrate into the team culture and usage need.

Senior leaders must therefore develop a clear strategy for matching technology tool options to the communication and collaboration needs of their distributed teams. The tools strategy should consider four primary factors: 1) How the team interacts through conversation, transactions, and collaboration; 2) Which method of communication and collaboration best meets their needs – synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of both; 3) Contextual differences of the distributed teams such as physical infrastructure limitations, culture and language, time zones, and team size; and 4) Tasks that the team will undertake that require assistance from tools.

By analyzing the various factors involved in a distributed team's communication and collaboration practices, the senior management team can develop a tools strategy. The analysis does not have to be a complicated undertaking. A simple mapping of the various communication and collaboration factors that are in play for a firm's distributed teams to the various tool options may be sufficient to formulate an effective strategy.

### **Face to Face Interaction**

It is widely recognized that one of the best enablers to assist distributed teams in organizing and building team rapport is an organization's senior management recognizing and investing in the need for face to face interaction between the team members. This is especially critical during the early team formation and charter setting phases of the project. Additionally, this contributes significantly to building trust, teamwork and ongoing working relationships between the team members. Once these bonds are formed, it helps significantly in establishing lasting relationships that carry forward once the team members work within their physically separated sites.

There are other key enablers that senior management should address in order to provide the optimal environment for distributed teams that we don't have space available to address in this article. Please see our books and other published articles for a more in-depth discussion of this topic.

### **References:**

1. Hildenbrant & Brandi, 2012, [www.hildebrandtbrandi.com/ff1/Global-Project-Management-Enablers.pdf](http://www.hildebrandtbrandi.com/ff1/Global-Project-Management-Enablers.pdf)
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If you have questions or want additional information about the subjects discussed in this article, please contact us at any time. If this was a useful article, please share it. Thank you for reading. The Program Management Academy Team: Russ Martinelli, Jim Waddell and Tim Rahschulte. Email Address: [info@programmanagement-academy.com](mailto:info@programmanagement-academy.com). Website: [www.programmanagement-academy.com](http://www.programmanagement-academy.com).

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