

*Series on Project Management for Team Members*

## **Proper Behaviors of Project Team Members<sup>1</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the second article of the series: Project Management for Team Members (aka Project Followership). In this article we will explore the key behaviors that project team members should implement while participating in projects.

We are aware that there are still organizations and projects where team members must simply do what they are told to do and nothing more. In those settings, fully applying Project Followership is not easy.

However, we are witnessing a dramatic reduction of these types of organizations and projects. The evident increase in complexity and uncertainty, and the need for speed that many projects are asked to comply with, are no longer suitable for one-man-show paradigms where analysis and decision-making are centralized in a single or few persons and where passive and execution-only team members are a good fit. Today team members still have to be good executors but they are also asked to make more and more decisions and to share part of the leadership efforts.

### **PROPER BEHAVIORS OF PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS**

Based on the trends we have seen both in organizations (leadership and followership, shared leadership, boundary spanning, proactive behaviors) and in project management (mainly agile and lean project management) we have identified six main behaviors that an effective team member should adopt.

The first one is **Global Vision**. Global vision is the ability to construct and maintain an overview of the project and to understand how one's decisions and behaviors influence other tasks, people, and the project as a whole. Having a global vision allows people to make better decisions and to have better relationships with the team members. In fact, the more a person has a 360° view of the project, the more they are able to understand how their decisions fit with the rest of the project and to understand the perspectives and the needs of the other team members. Let us consider the following example.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an update and supplement to the paper: Project Followership: How Project Team Members Can Contribute to Project Success. PM World Journal, Vol. III, Issue X – October 2014. Moreover, this paper is largely based on Chapter 2 of the book: Sampietro, M., Villa, T.; *Empowering Project Teams. Using Project Followership to Improve Performance*, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

## PDF

Big universities are used to hosting important events with notable guest speakers. When the guest speakers are very famous it is common to find that the demand for seats is greater than the number actually available. Once, a university selected the supplier Evy to organize and run a large event (entrance, wardrobe, catering, etc.) while the reservation procedures were managed by the university. In order to book a seat for the event, attendees had to fill in a form on the university website. There were 1000 seats available, which were assigned based on the reservation sequence. The university decided to adopt the following registration system: up to registration number 1000, the system gave this message: "Congratulations, your seat has been reserved. Your registration number is X (from 1 to 1000)".

Knowing that many people reserve a seat and then do not show up, the university decided to provide this feedback for people with registration numbers higher than 1000: "Your registration number is X (over 1000) so we cannot guarantee your entrance to the event. However, in the event of no-shows, we will permit entrance to those with registration numbers over 1000, following the registration sequence".

On the morning of the event, the person in charge of the registration process sent a PDF file to Evy with the participants ordered by reservation number.

For the first 1000 people there were no major issues, in fact people just showed their receipt with the registration number and if it was under 1000 then entrance was granted. Problems started when registration numbers over 1000 were presented, since, in order to understand if there was enough room, someone had to check who was present and who had not shown up. This is a very easy task with worksheet software, but much less so with a PDF file. The result was a very slow and error-prone registration procedure. The last people were admitted when the speech was already 50 minutes in!

From a formal point of view the university team member had done their job: the list had been forwarded to Evy and it was correct. Unfortunately, a list in PDF format did not support the task or the entire event. As a result, during and after the event, much negative feedback was posted on the university's Facebook page and many jokes were made about the university's poor event organization skills.

It has also been noticed (Blanchard and Bowles, 1997) that global vision plays an important role in self-motivation. In fact, a key aspect in motivating team members is the concept of having them realize how important their function is, both in a broad sense (impact at social and organizational level) and in a more narrow sense (impact on related tasks and the project).

## THE REPORT

Two colleagues were asked to create sales reports for their supervisor once they had been invited to join a project. Their role in the project was to propose some customizations to the reports and then to implement those customizations in the reporting system. It was nothing new for them; they had done customizations many times before so the task was neither exceptional nor motivational. At a meeting, the project manager mentioned that the new report would be used by all the C-level managers during the Board of Directors' meetings to discuss the improvement areas in the company. This information created a link between the task and the impact at

company level and as a result the motivation level of the two colleagues skyrocketed.

The second proper behavior is **Openness**. Openness can be considered a precursor of Global Vision; it is the ability to encourage and sustain a dialectic discussion with other members of the project team and the project manager, paying genuine attention to the viewpoints of others, with a view to achieving a common goal. Openness derives from the fact that nobody has the knowledge to solve all the problems in a project and from the interdependencies that exist among project tasks.

In interdependent systems, the behavior of an individual has an impact not only on the effectiveness of that individual, but also on the effectiveness of others, including groups, teams, and the organization as a whole. The potential for an individual to contribute to effectiveness at a team or an organizational level depends on the embeddedness of his or her work role in the social context (Murphy and Jackson 1999). When the activities of a work role are independent of others, then there is a simple link between an individual's behavior and effectiveness as an employee.

When the activities of a work role are interdependent with other roles, the link between behavior and effectiveness is more complex. For these reasons exchanging ideas and asking for support is fundamental in a project environment. Chaleff (1995) also claims that effective followers are cooperative and collaborative, qualities that are essential to all human progress.

#### A SOMEWHAT CLOSED OPENNESS

It was the first time the company SmartTechy had faced an interdivisional project that involved practically all the company divisions. Usually each division developed its own projects independently. As a company decision, some products of the various divisions were also competing on the market, in order to encourage continuous improvement. During a project planning meeting, it became clear there was a need for strong interdependence between two divisions on some project activities. To coordinate themselves better, the project manager asked the divisions to provide more detailed schedules than the high-level ones that had been provided up to that point. One participant gave an absolutely unexpected response: "I think collaboration is essential, but I'd rather sell the information to another company than give it to the other division. They mustn't know how long we take to complete that activity, otherwise they'd be able to understand if they are competitive or not". Perhaps it is superfluous to add that this behavior was swiftly chastised and the team member taken off the project.

The third behavior is **Initiative**. Initiative is the ability to take action on key issues of the project even in the absence of instructions or a precise order. Initiative means being proactive: do not wait to be told what to do; if you notice project situations that need to be revised or fixed, inform others of them, propose and if possible implement solutions without hesitation. Chaleff (1995) in his five unique behaviors of courageous followers mentions: "they generate new ideas and initiate actions to improve external and internal processes. Courageous followers seek solutions and encourage others to do the same."

Proactive behaviors normally produce positive results (Frese and Fay 2001) however other authors (Belschak, Den Hartog, and Fay 2010) acknowledge that personal initiative (as one type of proactivity at work) does not always have positive consequences; in combination with low skills, personal initiative may often lead to negative consequences. A type of initiative is to proactively establish relationships with stakeholders external to the project team (the so-called boundary spanning behavior, see Marrone, Tesluk, and Carson, 2007) in order to gain useful information, to influence the stakeholders' decisions and to control the stakeholders' satisfaction.

#### THE WEAK INITIATIVE

The company Laby had succeeded in becoming the supplier of a prestigious multinational company which, in brand and size, differed greatly from Laby's usual clients, which were typically small. During the implementation of the intranet portal for the sales force, the project manager noticed that the testing activities were more complex than those planned. A solution therefore needed to be found because the client was very strategic and it was thus imperative to respect the end date agreed. So a meeting was called to evaluate how to proceed and in the end it was decided to pull in some outside consultants to work alongside the internal resources for the testing activities. During the meeting many people said they had contacts in this area. After four days a second meeting was organized to assess the different alternatives and then choose the consultancy firm. In practice this was not necessary as only one person had taken the trouble to speak to their contacts, the others had not done anything. Given the emergency, it was decided to "choose" the firm suggested, not knowing, however, if the price was fair or if other firms might have better references.

The fourth behavior is **Influence**. Influence is the ability to get other people involved in the solutions to be adopted and/or actions to be taken in the overall organization of the project. Influence means being assertive: while it does not mean that one person has formal or hierarchical authority in the project group, sometimes results are obtained simply by influencing, collaborating and supporting one's point of view with solid arguments. Influence is an exercise of shared leadership, in fact "shared leadership occurs when all members of a team are fully engaged in the leadership of the team and are not hesitant to influence and guide their fellow team members in an effort to maximize the potential of the team as a whole. Simply put, shared leadership entails a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by "serial emergence" of official as well as unofficial leaders. In this sense, shared leadership can be considered a manifestation of fully developed empowerment in teams" (Pearce 2004). Finally Kelley (1992) defines exemplary followers as "...willing to question leadership. This type of follower is critical to organizational success. Exemplary followers know how to work well with other cohorts and present themselves consistently to all who come into contact with them".

#### SORRY, BUT IF...

The project plan is practically complete. The project team is satisfied with the work performed. It involves a series of four theatrical performances to be held outdoors on

midsummer evenings in little-known historical locations in the province. One performance in each location. It is the first time an initiative of this kind has taken place. During planning the project team rightly considered the possible risks (what if it rains, what if few people attend, what if the main actor gets sick, what if the light system breaks...) and defined the response actions. "For each threat we have the answer ready", the project manager said proudly. Everyone agreed except for the youngest and least experienced team member, who said: "...but what if more people come than we have seats for?". "We haven't thought of that, we'll be lucky if more than 500 people attend each evening, it's still a local event and there are no famous names", answered the project manager. The team member went on: "Ok, but if more people than expected do turn up what kind of problems are we going to face? Crowds, lines, traffic jams, complaints, security...". The insistence was silenced: "It would be great to think about this public success but it's pure fantasy, we'll deal with it at the time!". The project plan was approved without taking into consideration the possibility feared by the young team member. The first performance, which was held in a small ancient courtyard in the countryside, was attended by over 1000 people – good weather in conjunction with a food and wine fair held in the vicinity and the fact that the week before a tourism magazine had published an article on the most beautiful courtyards in the countryside, including the one in question, all played their parts. In a nutshell: crowds, shoving, police intervention, panicked actors and so on. "Damn it, if only they had listened to me", the young team member thought to himself. "Damn it, if only you had insisted he listen to you more", we add.

The fifth behavior is **Adaptability**. Adaptability is the ability to be flexible in project contexts that are constantly changing. Workers need to be increasingly adaptable, versatile, and tolerant of uncertainty to operate effectively in these changing and varied environments (Pulakos, Donovan, and Plamondon 2000). Since projects are inherently uncertain and become clear along the way, nowadays adaptability is a key competence and behavior. Adaptability is supported by global vision and openness. In fact, the more one person understands the project and the relationships among people and tasks, the more they are willing to adapt their behavior in order to achieve the project (and not only personal) goals. In addition, the more a person establishes communications with other team members and stakeholders, the more mutual adaptations will occur.

#### ADAPTABILITY YES, BUT FOR OTHERS

During the later stages of the project to develop the intranet portal for the sales force, the new client informed Laby's project manager of its dissatisfaction with some activities; in particular the user support documentation was not considered adequate to clearly explain the system features. The project manager and the project sponsor of Laby, analyzing the situation, decided that the client was right to be dissatisfied. The project manager then spoke with the team member responsible for the system documentation, who replied: "Our clients are always satisfied with the documentation we provide. It's hardly our fault if this client has difficulty understanding, at most they'll take a little longer to understand the system but then they'll adapt, everybody can adapt, you just have to be willing".

Finally, the sixth behavior is **Professionalism**. Professionalism is the ability to assume a role and act on the basis of professional, behavioral and ethical models considered to be of reference in an individual's field. Professionalism means:

- Having specialized knowledge on a particular subject matter. This is an essential requirement for a good team member and a typical success factor (Pinto and Slevin 1988): in order to interact “on a par” with the project manager and the other members of the project team it is essential to provide a solid and tangible contribution of professional expertise.
- Having specialized knowledge on project management relevant for project team members. A good project team member should know what are the most important project management topics and how to apply them in order to be integrated with the other project participants.
- Ethics. Kelley (1988) suggests that on top of the most important characteristics of an effective follower may be the willingness to tell the truth. As the quantity of available information has increased exponentially, it has become imperative that team members provide truthful information. In addition, ethics is an important component of project management professional development (see the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct).
- Intelligent disobedience. As Ira Chaleff (2015) suggests in his latest book, intelligent disobedience means “doing right when what you are told to do is wrong”. Intelligent disobedience makes a lot of sense in project management as project team members sometimes receive directions and orders that may be detrimental to the project and even harmful. In these cases, by disobeying the specific order, the team member is not only making an attempt to respond appropriately to the situation, but they are also saving the project manager (or another source of authority) from doing things that would harm their reputation. According to Chaleff (2015), and customizing his view to the case of team members, intelligent disobedience can be summarized with the following steps:
  - Understand the mission of the organization, the project or the group, the goals of the activity of which team members are a part, and the values to guide how to achieve those goals;
  - When a team member receives an order that does not seem appropriate to the mission, goals, and values, clarify the order as needed, then pause to further examine the problem with it, whether that involves its safety, effectiveness, cultural sensitivity, legality, morality, or common decency;
  - Make a conscious choice whether to comply with the order or to resist it and offer an acceptable alternative when there is one;

- Assume personal accountability for your choice, recognizing that if you obey the order you are still accountable regardless of who issued the order.

#### A NOT ENTIRELY ETHICAL ESTIMATE

During the project development, the project manager asked a team member to estimate the duration of an activity he was in charge of. The task was to: “Install and configure 200 new PCs in the three company locations”. The response was immediate: “Well, it’ll take at least 30 working days”. The project manager was amazed but also unhappy with the answer, and replied: “Look, I understand you’re a professional in your sector, but how can you give such a quick estimate without knowing where the locations are and, above all, what type of applications will be installed during the initial configuration”. The team member, not having a valid response, said in a subdued tone: “I based it on my experience”.

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern project management practices highlight project team members as important contributors to project success.

From a behavioral perspective, there are six distinctive features that project team members should possess and implement: global vision, openness, initiative, influence, adaptability, and professionalism.

In each organization and in every project, the six behaviors may have different levels of intensity. Without doubt, the era of passive or execution-only team members is almost over.

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