

Project Team Members and Project Goals and Objectives

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Introduction

This is the seventh and final article of the series: Project Management for Team Members (aka Project Followership).

Here we will deal with the role of project team members in defining and interpreting project goals and objectives. We believe this topic deserves special attention since in many studies focused on Project Critical Success Factors, project goals and objectives are frequently listed among the top factors. However, to our knowledge, nobody has commented on whether project team members should contribute to the definition of project goals and objectives and how they interpret them.

Before going any further, it is important to clarify what project goals and objectives are. In fact, by surfing the web or reading different project management books, you will find slightly different to very different (and even contrasting) definitions. The first thing we noticed (which surprised us) is that the definition of project goal(s) is not particularly frequent in project management literature, while more attention is paid to the definition of project objectives. For example, the PMBOK® defines objectives and not goals. We also noticed that many books and articles report “project goals and objectives” together and we had the feeling that the terms were used with very similar meanings. Our feelings were supported by the definitions provided in English dictionaries where the difference between goals and objectives is subtle.

For example, The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language defines an objective as something worked toward or striven for; a goal; and goal as the object toward which an endeavor is directed; an end.

Since we do not wish to bore you with all the definitions we found, to summarize, in Table 1 you can find the main differences between Goal and Objective.

Table 1. The Differences between Goal and Objective

	Goal	Objective
Most appropriate definition ¹	Something one wishes to accomplish. Broader, more timeless than an	A concrete statement describing what the project is trying to achieve. The

¹ This definition is also based on a personal evaluation since many different and even contrasting definitions are available. We selected these definitions because to us they set quite clear boundaries between goals and objectives.

	objective. Expressed as a desired and targeted happening. ²	objective should be written at a low level, so that it can be evaluated at the conclusion of a project to see whether it was achieved or not. A well-worded objective will be Specific, Measurable, Attainable/Achievable, Realistic and Time bound (SMART) ³
Measure	In can be qualitative and/or quantitative.	It should be quantitative.
Link with the project effort	Indirect. External factors may influence the ability to attain the project goal.	Direct. If the project tasks are correctly implemented, project objectives should be achieved.
Time frame to measure the achievement	Normally some time has to pass after the project end in order to see the effect on the project goal.	Normally right after the conclusion of the project/deliverable/actions/tasks that should achieve the objective.
Impact type	Normally measured in business terms (sales increase, costs reduction, market share, time to market, agility, reputation etc.).	Normally measured in technical terms (acceptance of the solution, respect of schedule and budget etc.).
Numerosity	One or just a few.	One to many relationships with goals. There can be up to a few dozen. ⁴

Project Team Members and the Definition of Project Goals and Objectives

An initial question involves trying to define whether it is correct to involve project team members in the definition of project goals and objectives.

By following the suggestions and interpretations we gave in the previous articles of the “Project Management for Team Members” series some may think that the answer must be a big fat yes!

² Batten, J. D, *Tough-Minded Leadership*, AMACOM, New York, NY, 1989

³ Mochal T, *the TenStep Project Management Process Glossary*

⁴ It depends case by case however, and it is good practice not to confuse technical requirements and the desired performances of tasks, sets of tasks, and deliverables with the project objectives. Project objectives refer to the project as a whole and in order to have a focused team there should not be too many of them.

However, this is the time for exceptions. As a starting point we can say that “it depends.” Now we shall try to explain why.

Team members are usually experts of a particular professional/technical domain. Team members might be best placed to propose innovations related to their expertise but they are not always able to see or understand the big picture. In addition, team members tend to promote incremental innovations since disruptive innovation may put their work at stake and render their skills obsolete. Put another way, what at team member level may be considered a disruptive innovation, at top management level may be considered an incremental or limited innovation. Let us consider an example related to the car industry. For a person working on light components, the advent of LED could be considered a disruptive innovation (the next one seems to be the laser) because LEDs have much lower energy consumption compared to other commercial available solutions (such as Xenon), they are more durable and they permit more freedom in the design of a car. From a top management perspective, however, LEDs are still an innovation but they are not “game changers” in the car sector. Elon Musk with Tesla is a game changer, and from a completely different perspective Sergio Marchionne was a game changer when FIAT took control of Chrysler with a one-of-a-kind financial transaction.

If we buy this interpretation (we are aware that there are many exceptions), when radical innovation and big performance improvement are needed, projects goals and objectives should not be set or too influenced by project team members. In this scenario the paradigm is: first let’s set ambitious goals, then let’s translate them into project objectives, finally let’s find a way to accomplish them. There are well-known examples of this approach: Steve Jobs was quite famous for proposing solutions that were considered impossible by technicians, while Ratan Tata decided to build a \$2000 car (the Tata Nano) when all the estimates of other car makers suggested that it would be impossible for less than \$4500. The Tata Nano is actually a good example to show the difference between goals and objectives. From a technical perspective the project objectives were met, while the goals, in term of sales, were not. This is because a wrong assumption was made, namely that people would be eager to buy a very cheap car. Consumer behavior analysis has revealed that placing great emphasis on the concept of it being the cheapest car in the world triggered the impression that owning a Tata Nano would mean showing that you are poor and have no ambitions. It seems that many people preferred to buy a secondhand car rather than a brand new Tata Nano for fear of being judged as mentioned above.

Of course these are extreme and famous examples, but people who have had the opportunity to work with all organizational layers (from C-levels to blue collars) have noticed that many successful projects started by setting very ambitious goals and objectives that were even originally refused or deeply criticized by the project team.

However, the same people can also report that the most unsuccessful projects started in the very same way and that greater involvement of the project team could have prevented such disasters by informing top management of the objective reasons why such goals and objectives were impossible.

It would be nice to have a scientific formula to determine when project team members should be involved in setting project goals and objectives, but unfortunately there isn't one.

As a personal observation, it seems that some top managers are able to understand when a sector/technology is too fixed on traditions and thus when there is room for feasible disruptive innovation. On the other hand, not all top managers have this ability and in an attempt to change the rules of the game they end up in a "game over" situation.

Project Team Members and the Interpretation of Project Goals and Objectives

Some organizations evaluate project performance by considering the project objectives while other organizations consider the project goals as well. As project goals are influenced by external factors too, it seems more reasonable to evaluate the project team on project objectives only. However, we can also argue that measuring projects on objectives only may create the paradox of running many successful projects in an unsuccessful organization or, to use an idiomatic expression, the operation was successful but the patient died. For this reason, some prefer to stretch the concept of project success by also taking into consideration the achievement of the project goals, in full or in part.

The way an organization evaluates the performance of the project team has an influence on how it interprets project goals and objectives and subsequent behaviors.

If an organization measures the project success by only considering the achievement of the project objectives, project team members are not incentivized to develop what we called Global Vision (see PMWJ N.43, February 2016). In this way the links (they can be synergies as well as conflicts) between one project and other projects or processes are overlooked and extra-project communication is not fostered. An additional risk is to reinforce an "it's not my job" culture where people do not care about the real outcome of the project, and compliance with organizational processes and rules is more important than real customer satisfaction. In theory, properly designed project objectives and the definition of the interfaces among different projects may limit these issues. Unfortunately, very often there is no time or expertise to design such perfect systems.

The alternative is to empower the project team with respect to the project goals too, or at least some of them. If project goals are not considered completely independent from the project effort, team members may change their perspective and behaviors and they may interpret their role in a more extended and complex way. Some of the most important changes we can mention include:

- trying to understand the relationships established in the project and other related efforts (other projects, processes, operations etc.). In this way the team can discover how they influence the project and how the project can

influence them and, in turn, this can reveal new opportunities to achieve the project goals;

- seeing the project from a broader perspective by exploring and understanding how the project fits into the overall strategy, thus including additional variables that should be managed in order to achieve the project goals.

From a technical perspective, measuring the project performance on project goals too (note: in addition to project objectives and not as their replacement) means adding more flexibility to project objectives. For example, if a direct measure of customer satisfaction is not part of the initial agreed project objectives but in order to achieve the project goals above-average customer satisfaction is required and the team recognize this aspect during project execution, in practice it is as though an additional project objective has been added without it having been formalized.

From a team member perspective, interpreting project objectives is easier than also dealing with project goals. Unfortunately, in dynamic and complex environments being focused on project objectives only may not be enough to sustain organizational success in the long run. The paradox is that in an attempt to be very rigorous and accurate in defining the project objectives, we are also adding an element of rigidity that might not fit with the environment the team has to deal with. On the other hand, project goals are subtler when viewed from team member perspective and they may lead to different interpretations and possible conflicts among team members and between team members and the rest of the organization. This is especially true if those members have not been trained to think in a systemic way.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning, this contribution concludes the article series on “Project Management for Team Members”. We have presented different topics which were not strictly related to each other since the idea was not to create a comprehensive and systemic work (which was the purpose of our book) but rather to address topics that have not been discussed elsewhere and that we thought were relevant.

If you like, we will continue to publish articles on “Project Management for Team Members” and other topics too in the *PM World Journal*.

Thank you for your attention and stay tuned!

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Marco Sampietro obtained a Ph.D. at the University of Bremen, Germany. Since 2000 he has been a professor at [SDA Bocconi School of Management](http://www.sdabocconi.it), Milan, Italy. SDA Bocconi School of Management is ranked among the top Business Schools in the world (Financial Times, Forbes, Bloomberg, and The Economist rankings). He is a Core Faculty Member at SDA Bocconi School of Management and teaches Project Management on the MBA – Master of Business Administration, and GEMBA – Global Executive Master of Business Administration programs. He is Faculty Member at [MISB](http://www.misb.edu) – Mumbai International School of Business, the Indian subsidiary of Bocconi University, and Visiting Professor at IHU – International Hellenic University, Greece. He is also a Contract Professor at [Bocconi University](http://www.bocconiuniversity.it) and [Milano Fashion Institute](http://www.milano-fashion-institute.com) for the Project Management courses.

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He is contributor, co-author and/or editor of 11 books on project management and 7 books on IT management. Among them: [Empowering Project Teams. Using Project Followership to Improve Performance. CRC Press, 2014](http://www.crcpress.com). Finally, he is the author of award-winning case studies and papers.

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