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Talent Management in Project Management

By Mark Healy

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I just finished an engagement with a professional services firm, and the CEO and I were talking about project management. We were joking about Gantt charts, and how often Gantt charting becomes an exercise in moving coloured bars around. This happens more in SMBs than it does with enterprises running large, complex, multi-stakeholder projects. I think the gist of the issue is that too often with private businesses, project managers start with the Gantt chart, and not the team.

The most successful project managers I know – in small and large client organizations – understand that project management starts with talent management. To be a great project manager, you need to first be a great manager. This is a crucial concept for every up-and-coming project manager.

As David Maister, author of the seminal book *The Trusted Advisor* so succinctly puts it: “the trouble with the work world is, it is full of people.” I can’t think of any projects where the project manager will not need to manage, or at least interface with, people, in order to finish. They may be employees or team members or even bosses, or they may be outside the organization – suppliers, consultants, customers. The point is the project manager is at least somewhat (likely very) reliant on others to succeed.

I remember an episode of *The Apprentice* from the first season in which one of the contestants tries to manage a polo event with a spreadsheet. He rides to the event alone in a limo separated from his team, and spends more time behind his laptop than he does with his team and his vendors. It didn’t end well for him.

Tactical

At a tactical level, there are some very simple ‘rules’ I have gathered from some very smart folks over the years, for top notch talent management. All of them are excellent precursors to top notch project management, especially in SMBs:

- Give people the tools/resources they need, teach them what you can, then get out of the way.
- Start every statement with “we”.
- Give credit where credit is due: if things go well, share the glory with the team.
- Shoulder the responsibility: if things go off the rails, take the blame. It is your fault.

- Praise in public, punish in private.
- It is impossible to over-communicate. It is impossible to be too redundant. It is impossible to over-communicate.
- Respect and take care of your team members – you will need them.

Strategic

My kindergarten teacher had a poster on the wall of our classroom with a picture of a dart sticking into a wall. The caption was “If you aim at nothing, you’ll probably hit it.” Project management is tough enough as it is – dealing with other people and their respective motivations and schedules, and dealing with time and money and lots of moving pieces. Things are going to go wrong. With that in mind, there are some strategic skills I’ve learned in engineering and consulting, which tie talent management to project management:

- Project planning
- Communications planning
- Day-to-day active team management
- Documentation, tracking and reporting

Project planning. I have seen many projects either fail outright, or delivered late and/or over budget. Many of them fail in the planning stage. The basics are very simple, but so often ignored. Every project plan should consist of the same elements: a clearly defined and measurable objective, milestones and a deadline, a budget, and a clearly laid out action plan including specific tasks where each task is assigned a due date and one champion. To put a fine point on it, some project failures I’ve encountered were doomed by either an unclear objective or by having multiple people assigned to getting a task done.

How does this tie to talent management? The great project managers I know involve team members and external parties in the project planning, to a) build a better plan, and b) increase buy-in and longer term chances of success.

Communications planning. This is not only almost never done well, it is almost never done at all. Yet it can make or break a project. What good is it to have a solid work plan if the project sponsor (senior management, client, etc.) doesn’t know what is going on? They will fret about it. They will check in. They will start to micro-manage. They may run interference and start asking team members directly for updates, or meddle in their tasks.

The best means of avoiding all of this is to a) figure out how and when the project sponsor would like to be updated – email?, phone?, daily?, weekly?, and then to b) proactively send out structured updates – the shorter the better. And the same level of

respect should be shown to team members. Clear, open, honest and regular communication with each person on the team is important, and should be planned for at the start.

Day-to-day active team management. This is where the rubber hits the road. Whether motivating, coaching, brainstorming with, solving problems for, updating, questioning, pushing back on, or seeking updates from team members – or just staying on top of tasks – this is where a project manager often surfaces the most value. Nearly all of these activities are related to talent management, not technical execution.

Documentation, tracking and reporting. Back to where we started: Gantt charts. Whatever the tracking tool, the goal is to manage the project, not the tool. Depending on the project scale and the project sponsor, documentation and reporting will be more or less important. But regardless of the amount of paperwork desired, it should always take a back seat to team work until milestones are approaching.

One rule around tracking tools is: simpler is better. simple tools reduce the likelihood of constantly have to change or adjust the tool itself as the project inevitably morphs, and increases the likelihood of reflecting the project changes in the reporting.

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