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Editors Comment

So how are those New Year's resolutions coming along? Hopefully they haven't all fallen by the wayside already! If it is still a bit quiet due to the holiday season, you've probably taken the chance to reflect on last year's successes and disappointments. Maybe you have renewed vigour to make this year work just the way you plan. In beginning a new project, participants and managers often have that same feeling of being provided with a fresh start. One of the reasons it is so important to manage project staff differently is that people are often left without a feeling of satisfaction from their work because the tasks seem never ending. When project managers fail to plan in enough detail, active and peripheral team members can become unmotivated and destabilise the rest of the team. That is the last thing a busy project manager needs, resulting in high staff turnover. This month's article discusses some key criteria for successful project managers.

Article: Be a Successful Project (People) Manager

There are some important steps for in keeping project team members feeling fresh, motivated and productive.

Commitment

Commit yourself to the project and make sure you've got the top management buy in. Otherwise you're leading yourself and staff members who've committed to you, up the garden path with no hope of a pot of gold at the end. What point is there in getting resources hyped, in raising customers expectations when you haven't secured the commitment you need from the executive? The best result you will get from this is the pin being pulled 2 months into your grand plan. This of course assumes that the project is feasible ie will add strategic value to the organisation. See previous newsletters for more on building positive NPV business cases.

Commitment means you need to secure dedicated resources wherever possible. People can't focus when efforts are spread too thinly, hence, for project efficiency, resources need to be directing their focus to one or a couple of projects. As a guide, a full-time project resource should be able to spend more than one day per week on each project and their allotted tasks.

Depending on the size of projects and the administrative support provided, a project manager should never have more than 2 projects on at any one time. While the 'work load' may not seem overwhelming, it is this extra time that enables the project manager to spend the essential time managing relationships and facilitating problem solving with team members.

Finally, the specialists in a project team who don't have a large task load need to be allowed to focus on their 'business as usual' job if that is the case but need to be kept informed via face-to-face contact. This doesn't mean that they need to be in every single meeting but they must be available where their knowledge is valuable in all the workshops and for problem solving when necessary.

It is the responsibility of the project manager to ensure the peripheral team members are not inundated with email communications but kept in the loop and motivated to participate through direct contact.

Plan, plan, plan and do

With focus at the right times (eg workshops from beginning), the time to completion, the cost of contracts and the probability of costly mistakes are all decreased. Time management experts recommend "To Do" lists because people feel a sense of accomplishment and 'closure' when a task is ticked off the list at the end of the day. It reminds them that they actually achieved something and can help people wind down after work if they can feel good about something from the day before it's home time!

Project task lists work exactly the same way. Planning to a detailed level provides obvious benefits in recognising and solving problems, being able to budget properly and knowing the risks. Another important benefit is the feel-good factor: resources can happily show what has been achieved at each progress meeting without having to blunder around "37% complete" rubbish figures to try and avoid the heat that usually arises when planning has been too vague.

Detailed planning, exact progress reporting and so on also help staff feel comfortable about raising and tackling issues and asking for help when needed. This is because a detailed plan helps create a 'blame-free', happier working environment due to the fact that there's less accusation and more work done.

Train your staff

When people feel incompetent, problems stay hidden and grow larger or mutate! This means wasted time, money and even project failure. Just because someone has been required to do something similar before, doesn't mean they enjoyed the work, felt competent, did a good job or will do a good/better job this time.

Sometimes individuals may feel their experience overrides the need for training but so often, after a training course "I didn't want / need to go on", the person has discovered a new approach to the work, discovered the solution to a problem within their work approach or found a way to articulate something they 'knew' instinctively.

A few hundred dollars is not much to pay to build a staff member's confidence and increase their ability to work productively and proactively! However, if training budgets are too tight, there are other means. Subscribe to a relevant newsletter, project management journal or buy some books that the whole team can benefit from. Staff will appreciate that you have looked for an alternative and will hopefully read and learn. Reinforce your desire for them to learn by having a component of their performance appraisal based on learning.

Remember personal development

Training is important for the team in terms of capability, productivity and motivation. It is also important for the individual. People get more satisfaction from their jobs if they can cite learning as part of their role. Money isn't everything in attracting and retaining good staff so you as the project manager or sponsor need to be able to offer learning opportunities or 'extra curricular' learning if there are no current opportunities.

Project management is a path that more people are becoming interested in following in an academic and practical path. The industry bodies (AIPM, PMI) are gaining momentum and new members from a range of industries, instead of the traditional construction arena. Project management skills are valuable and you're more likely to keep someone you've trained and developed rather than lose them to a competitor.

On a different level, ensure that all project staff see some personal benefit in being involved in your project. Try to find out what motivates them (recognition, variety, financial bonus,

opportunities in skill development, networking) and appeal to their interests eg technical knowledge growth, strategic thinking, relationship management).

Closing Comments

Managing the people in a project is a huge effort that requires much skill and attention from the project manager and even the sponsor at times. Therefore, project managers are at their best when they have the services of an excellent project administrator so that everything goes to plan. Correct resourcing, commitment to the project and to the people is the way to get the job done well. That means on time, on budget, to quality specifications, to customer expectations and with your team intact and feeling proud at the end.