



Successful Teams

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Reflections on working in an international project team

1. Introduction

While I was drafting this paper I received an email from one of the team members at ISSA, Judith Fowler. It's well worth quoting:

"I feel the human factor is very important, and I suppose there's always an element of luck when a large group of people find themselves working together... there is the general enthusiasm, genuine desire to learn and share experiences, willingness to reach agreement, enthusiastic participation in social activities (which is when many spin off ideas emerge)... I think someone referred to us as the "dream team". And if you think of football, what is it that has a team winning cups one season and fighting against relegation the next? No easy answer."

Judith was responding to an observation made frequently in the team meetings about the effectiveness of the InterAct project team and also the rich rewards, both personal and professional, the members have felt in working as a part of it.

All of us can recall different and less positive experiences as members of other teams. This paper is an attempt to address the question of why this particular team has been so successful and to make some suggestions for replication of our experiences.

2. Context of the project

The InterAct project team exists in a very specific context. As with all project teams it is a temporary organisation set up with the implementation of a fixed and well-defined set of tasks in mind that must be completed in a fixed time. These are all clearly laid out in the original project proposal, along with a clear budget, staffing plan, resource allocation and leadership and management structure. These are accompanied by a logical and appropriate allocation of expertise and responsibilities to the various tasks. Responsibility for leadership, management and administration is also clear, resting with Vox in Norway.

The project also exists in the context of European funding and the mission and values reflected in Leonardo funding and of the European Union itself.

3. Vision and values

A very clear overall context is therefore provided by the requirement for the project to support the economic strand of the European vision. This overall context exerted a powerful influence on the formation of InterAct. The project had to form in a way that could contribute towards the economic and political impulses that had called it into being. The trans-national dimension and involvement of vocational training specialists and enterprises whose employees had significant basic skills needs were all conditions of existence.

At project level, this translated readily into a vision equally powerfully influenced by the mission of Vox, the lead partner (comment from Graciela Sbertoli, Assistant Director, Head of Unit for Basic Skills and International Co-operation):

"... we have a mission statement. It has four words and the first is almost untranslatable. The closest I can come to an English phrase is "Advocacy for adult learning". The Norwegian word "pådriver" sounds much more active than "advocate", though. It has connotations such as "locomotive", "initiator", "innovative force", "fighter". So maybe you should translate it with "Making adult learning happen"... As for values, we currently have a list of three: user-friendliness, courage and generosity/open-mindedness"

Coherence of vision and values begins to emerge. For example, Westminster Adult Education Service has as its vision:

"Inspiring and developing our community through learning"

and all the partners share a sense of purpose informed by similar sentiments, either implied by their activities or explicit in their public statements.

4. Leadership

Leadership is a complex and much-researched subject. No one has yet been able to provide a definitive recipe for success. Team members have frequently expressed warm admiration for the leadership team and identified their leadership style as key to the success of the project and especially in keeping the team motivated. I would like to suggest that this has been achieved through skillful application of expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) and careful construction of an organic organisation (Burns and Stalker, 1966) as well as through effective and efficient administration.

Expectancy theory is all about motivation and says that well motivated teams are characterised by a positive correlation between efforts and performance. InterAct team members believe that

- Favourable performance will result in a desirable reward
- The reward will satisfy an important need
- The desire to satisfy the need is strong enough to make the effort worthwhile.

An organic organisation is a fluid and flexible network of multi-talented individuals who perform a variety of tasks without being restrained by hierarchy or function. A series of observations by Simon Crowe¹, Learning Resources Manager at Westminster Adult Education Service, supports this view and is especially interesting on the role of technology in the project. Simon's personal observations are in italics.

"This "Successful Teams" checklist below, comes from Chris Widener (2006) which he applies to sports teams: He says "Sometimes we are the team leader or "coach," while other times we fulfill the role of follower, or "player."

* Is there communication between coach and players and from player to player?

A complex matrix of communication exists within the Interact team. Face-to face meetings are the essential foundation, but the effective online communications through public and private email, discussion forums chats and blogs (through the Virtual Learning Environment) has seen relationships blossom. This is the real power of e-communication creating and strengthening communities

* Is your team committed to excellence?

We work to a high standard. Randi and Graciela set those standards. Excellence must be a value common to a majority of the team members and we now have a "culture of excellence"

* Do those on the team know what it means to follow?

In my opinion all of the following apply:

- Leaders create followers create leaders.
- I will follow someone I trust.
- I will follow someone I like.
- I will follow someone who supports me.
- I will follow ideas, not objectives.

* Does everyone on the team know their specific role?

Not to my mind. Beyond project leader, we have never been assigned roles – so is this essential to a successful team when the other elements are in place? Tasks emerge and are assigned to people but not explicit roles (see below).

¹Further evidence of the organic nature of the team – giving a clear and specific "job title" to the team members is almost impossible. Everyone takes a variety of tasks.

* Do the individuals on the team regularly operate out of their strengths as opposed to their weaknesses?

Absolutely; front runners change constantly as the tasks change. Hence, the burden is shared, individuals take on responsibilities for the things they enjoy, are competent at, have the resources to do or feel are important.

No really challenging task is thrust on anybody. This is a key feature of Interact.

* Does the team take a break from time to time to just have fun together?

This cannot be stressed strongly enough

“The team that plays together stays together”. Fun is fixed into our code of behaviour. I call this the “Interact Model”. It creates a sense of bonding that lays the foundation for the success of the team...

* Is there a sense of and communication of genuine appreciation among my team?

Praise is plentiful and heart-felt. It flows around the of communication matrix discussed earlier it is not meted out from above.”

5. Conclusions and recommendations

From our experiences on InterAct I recommend the following as likely to contribute to setting up a successful project team:

- Work from an over-arching vision. This can be as broad as the vision of the entire European Union
- Ensure there is common ground between the partners in terms of vision and values
- Ensure the team has appropriate resources, skills and knowledge

- Recruit inspiring, skilled and experienced leaders who can provide a robust framework and plan
- Ensure administration is effective and transparent

- Build in worthwhile professional and personal rewards

- An organic organisation is particularly suitable to project work

- Successful teams need a certain amount of good fortune

For me, the most challenging and perhaps most critical of these is the setting up of the leadership team who are the glue that holds everything together. A final comment from Judith Fowler that captures this effectively in a way shared by all the team members:

“Graciela and Randi are great team leaders and always ready to answer any questions participants may have”.

Donald Lush
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Appendix

References

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