

Project Management for Supply Managers

**James L. Patterson, Ph.D., C.P.M., A.P.P., Associate Professor of Management
Western Illinois University – Quad Cities
309/762-3999, ext 256, JL-Patterson2@wiu.edu**

Abstract. The supply management (SM) field has long recognized that effective supply managers need to develop expertise with various project management skills, tools, and techniques. A major component of effective project management is the ability to develop, organize, and lead both ad hoc and long-term teams for such sourcing activities as supplier selection, supplier development, new product development, commodity management, and strategic sourcing. Therefore, this presentation will provide greater knowledge and insight of how typical SM project teams evolve through different phases in order to achieve higher levels of performance in a timely, cost-efficient manner. This process typically requires a project team leader to demonstrate different skills in each of the team development phases.

High performance project teams can be utilized for breakthrough results but require a high level of trust, commitment to the team, loyalty and cooperation among its members, and a unified vision of the team's and sponsoring organization's goals and objectives. Such teams can produce *synergy*, where the sum of the team's collective performance is greater than that of the individual team members working alone. There is a necessary tension that is developed by high performance project teams that bridges the creativity of individuals and the cooperation found in a team.

Phases of Project Team Development. The five phases of typical project team development will generally include: 1) initiation (forming), 2) conflict (storming), 3) negotiation (norming), 4) high performance (performing), and 5) adjourning. Different managerial and leadership skills are required to successfully navigate the project team through each of the different phases. Some project teams will move through the phases quickly and effortlessly, while most others will struggle through the initial phases and may not even get through all the team development phases successfully. Failure by team leadership to successfully work through each phase dooms the project team to mediocrity at best and abysmal performance at worst.

Initiation (Forming) Phase. At the outset of this phase, which is the transition from individual to team member, the project team is essentially being defined and created. The formal team leader must realize and account for the differences in age, gender, background, experience, and training that the various members of the project team will bring to the group initially. These preexisting conditions can dramatically influence the actual growth and development that the team will experience in later stages of the process. Perhaps the major skill that a project team leader must exercise in this phase is the ability to assess the breadth and depth of these preexisting conditions and how to overcome their potentially damaging effects on the efforts of the project team. In a sense they may actually provide constraints on how the team will function, at least at the beginning stages of development.

This initiation, or "forming," phase must not be skimmed over because how it is handled by the team's leadership can significantly affect the creation and acceptance of team goals and objectives, as well as how well the team members receive each other and commit to those

goals throughout the duration of the project. We all wear stereotypical “labels,” such as buyer, accountant, salesperson, manager, engineer, Gen-X’er, etc., that gives clues as to how we think and how we are viewed by other members on the team.

There is oftentimes a strong sense of individual uncertainty in terms of the team’s mission, goals and objectives, member roles, and processes. Team members normally may have feelings of apprehension, discomfort, and misunderstanding, oftentimes below the surface and not expressed verbally. They may also not fully trust each other and the team’s leadership. The basic question that the project team leader must answer, either explicitly or implicitly, for each and every team member is, “What’s in it for me?”

Sometimes, it is just as important to know who is *not* on the team as much as who is on the team. There is a need for the team leader to start to build climate, rapport, and receptivity to the team’s innate differences. However, at this stage, the “team” does not really exist; it is really just a committee or group.

The project team leader needs to be able to develop member commitment to the team, begin the empowerment of its members, remove the “labels,” and develop clarity in team roles, tasks, and processes. The role of team process is particularly important in that team members want to know how to deal both with each other and with the normal functional jobs that they came from. “Members depend on the project manager to provide direction and structure” (Gido and Clements 2003).

Conflict (Storming) Phase. During this “storming” phase of project team development, team members start to learn how to play out the interaction of their differences and begin to develop new and creative ideas to come to bear on the mission of the team, as well as the goals and objectives that are being formulated to pursue that mission. This is typically the most challenging phase for the project team leader, yet it is often the most critical because of the possible “ripple effect” that can color future team interactions. The team members need to be able to know, and accept, that there is often more than one acceptable answer or viewpoint to a problem or situation.

Members need to come to understand the differences, similarities, and strengths of the team members in light of the project team’s mission. The team leader’s challenge is to bridge real or perceived conflict, hostility, and member polarization; the immediate goal of the leader in the conflict phase is to start to build cooperative interpersonal relationships between team members.

Interpersonal skills that an effective project team leader needs to effectively demonstrate are generally facilitative in nature. For example, the leader needs to clearly delineate instructions in order to avoid misunderstandings. At the same time, however, the leader also must be capable of challenging existing team members’ paradigms and “labels” by assisting them in working through their preconceived notions, prejudices, and biases. Effective conflict resolution management for the project team leader also includes the ability to depersonalize individuals from the conflict while still maintaining or instilling respect between the team members.

Conflict does not mean dislike; it just means that there is a disagreement. The team members need to be able to generate ideas and solutions without fear of reprisal or retaliation. Creativity in a project team requires a brainstorming mentality. In other words, the generation of one idea or solution may actually result in the creation of even more feasible ideas or solutions in the future. Team members should not hesitate to participate because of fear of ridicule from the other team members. It is the project team leader's responsibility to create this kind of open and trusting environment.

Negotiation (Norming) Phase. Most project teams "stall out" in the norming phase. Why? Unless the differences and conflicts discovered in the forming and storming phases are worked through, the team will likely go back and forth between the storming and norming phases several times. During the negotiation phase, project team goals and objectives, norms (or expected behaviors), roles, tasks, and processes have been clarified, and team members develop and demonstrate their commitment to them.

In addition, interpersonal and interfunctional relationships have also become stabilized. This can be considered as the milestone phase where leaders and team members learn to offer and accept sincere and honest feedback to each other. However, team leaders and members both find that the risk of open and honest feedback is hard to accept because our culture promotes competition and individualism instead of cooperation and collaboration. Trust starts to develop in this stage as interpersonal and functional conflicts are settled.

The project team leader must create or promote a team culture and atmosphere where all members consider groupthink and egocentric behavior unacceptable. Groupthink is defined as a judgment error that develops in highly cohesive groups where divergent opinions are not tolerated and where the desire for harmony and unanimity supersede individual concerns. Egocentric behavior is that behavior that is focused on individual needs and wants to the detriment of the team's needs and wants.

Each team must develop its own set of norms or expected behaviors because norms imposed from other project teams are less acceptable to most team members, particularly if the members were not part of those teams. The project team leader creates the climate for future team member interactions and communication to occur readily, easily, and honestly.

Oftentimes, project teams will make mistakes that could have been avoided if the project team leader had intervened and made the decision himself or herself. The question for the team leader is, "How much latitude and leeway do I allow the project team before stepping in and doing this for them?" Failure can be a significant learning opportunity. When the team fails and the leader supports its efforts, the team can grow stronger.

The longer the term of the project team and as it progresses through the various phases of development, the problem of socialization of new members becomes more acute. The project team leader must devise ways to bring new team members up-to-speed quickly and efficiently. However, the greater the influx of new team members over the course of the project team's existence, the more likely it is that the team will revert back to an earlier developmental stage that must be worked through again.

Necessary project team leader skills include the ability to develop consensus, facilitate open and honest feedback, focus on commitment to goals and objectives, and acting as a coach instead of a traditional supervisor or manager.

High Performance (Performing) Phase. In this phase, there is a common vision of the project team's mission, roles, tasks, and processes. The creative tension that was developed earlier allows the team to develop synergy that encourages, not discourages, new ideas and innovative solutions. Team members have learned to build off of the ideas of others and to recover from their mistakes.

The project team has also learned how to make its own decisions as a group under the watchful eye of the team leader. "Team members, both individually and collectively, are taking higher levels of responsibility, authority, and control for project results" (Thamhain 2001). Occasionally, there is a need for the project team to renew its energy and focus; this is a cyclical process that requires the team leader to encourage risk-taking by celebrating successes and building on previous failures.

Project team member norms in this phase generally include authentic and open interpersonal relationships, shared responsibility for both success and failure, team and individual commitment, and high levels of trust between team members. Team member roles, skills, and differences have become complementary.

The skillful project team leader has learned to step back from detailed, day-to-day supervision of the team and now allows other leaders to emerge and develop naturally from the team's membership. In cases like this, leaders now act as mentors and networkers championing the project team's efforts to the organization's stakeholders, while keeping organizational, team, and individual goals and objectives in sight and balanced.

As a facilitator and coach, the project team leader allows the team's creative tensions to work while helping team members themselves bridge sensitive issues or save face. There is an overall focus on relationships and tasks simultaneously. Teaming skills and knowledge are shared between team members as the project team shifts into high gear. Open sharing and discussion are the norm.

Adjourning. In this phase, the project team has successfully completed its task or mission, and team goals and objectives have been substantially achieved. Two potential outcomes can exist in this adjourning phase of project development. "*Project success* means that the project has met its cost, schedule, and technical performance objectives," while "[p]roject *failure* means that the project has failed to meet its cost, schedule, and technical performance objectives, or it does not fit in the organization's future" (Cleland 1999).

Under either scenario, the team members in this phase often show a reluctance to return to their normal activities as the project team prepares to disband or terminate its activities. This resistance is often due to the close identification of the team members with the team and its accomplishments or activities. Emotional issues that are often encountered include: 1) loss of interest in remaining tasks or activities, 2) loss of team (or key individual) motivation, 3) loss of team identity, 4) reassignment of key participants, 5) how reassignments are conducted, or 6) unreconciled conflicts (Cleland 1999).

The team should also document what it has learned during the project team development process so that the learning can be applied in future project team settings. The project team leader should especially try to document measurable, bottom-line improvements, as well as the dynamics of the group. Some organizations, such as Deere and Company, have created on-line project reporting so that future project teams can go back to previous team results and outcomes and not have to “reinvent the wheel” as they move through the project team phases of development as described above.

“High performance is no longer a top priority. Instead attention is devoted to wrapping up the project” (Gray and Larson 2000).

Facilitative Skills of a Project Team Leader. Since project team management is a cross-functional approach to management, the following skills should be considered as necessary elements (at a minimum) of a project team leader’s professional portfolio or managerial toolbox.

The successful project team leader will strive to include others in the decision-making process, particularly once those team members have demonstrated the ability to make decisions. Also, since a SM project team environment is highly dynamic, the successful project team leader must demonstrate the ability to stay focused on the vision and task(s) at hand, even though he/she might be pulled in a number of tangential directions at the same time.

In regards to necessary technical knowledge, the project team leader should be familiar enough with the technology being used in the project order to understand when correct technological answers are being given. The project team leader should not spend too much time keeping pace with technical details because the business side of the project could be jeopardized.

In showing sensitivity to organizational, project team, and individual needs, the successful project team leader can use active listening techniques and open-ended questions to draw out unstated agendas and needs from the team participants and organizational stakeholders. The skilled project team leader must recognize that the team’s reward is group performance, not individual recognition. One of the prime project management skills necessary here is the project team leader’s acceptance of responsibility when the team fails but sharing credit with the team when it succeeds or reaches its goals and objectives.

Summary. Not every task requires a project team. The organization’s management must learn to recognize when a team is needed and when it is not needed. It must know “why” a project team is being put into place. Teams are most effective when used under the following conditions: 1) adequate time, 2) high task complexity, 3) the need to obtain organizational commitment to the task, 4) the need for high levels of innovation and creativity, 5) high costs, and/or 6) the opportunity for significant personnel development.

All teams move through natural phases, each of which is challenged by diversity, relationships, and culture. High performance in SM project teams is influenced by trust, commitment, cooperation, flexibility, and facilitative leadership. Oftentimes, the project team leader is more of an orchestra conductor or a coach rather than a traditional manager or supervisor. The

project team leader also needs to understand both the systems and strategic nature of the project and its activities so that he/she can interface effectively between organizational stakeholders and project team members.

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