Team Performance Index

*Achieving superior team performance is about leadership and establishing the working and communications environment to form the foundation for attaining team synergism. If you want to achieve success in all your projects you also need to follow the four performance realization principles enunciated in the **Project Management 5th Discipline** [i]*

When a team comes together, they bring varying levels of knowledge, understanding as well as experiences, beliefs and personalities. When a team starts working together to produce a project outcome, wide discrepancies in the knowledge and understanding required to achieve an outcome, can adversely impact team performance, unless a process to recognize and equalize these factors is put in place.

Introduction

The constant organizational changes prevent leveraging the experience of teams to work on new projects. More often than not, each new project involves new people, bringing different habits and levels of knowledge, understanding, and experience, which limit their ability to work as high performance teams.

Securing top performance from teams that have never worked together is one of the greatest challenges facing organizations with today's projects. No amount of traditional project management practices will necessarily facilitate the establishment of high-performance teams from the get go. Project managers need to understand the need to equalize the knowledge and understanding of a team to achieve superior team performance and foster synergism.

Audience

This paper is written for project management practitioners concerned with the study of team member interactions, to secure top performance, and consistently deliver successful projects. It is about understanding the underlying aspects of how the team may perform relative to an expected outcome before the project or activities begin.

Defining the Performance Index

When a team comes together, they bring varying levels of knowledge and understanding as well as experiences and beliefs. The disparity and gaps

between them will determine the team's ability to perform and succeed.

If you can determine what level of knowledge is required to achieve an outcome, and the level of understanding/ experience to apply it in order to achieve a desired result, you can derive and plot the "**Ability Index**" of each member of the team.

Figure 1 shows typical individual team members ability indexes (shown by the small stars) you could find in a project, relative to the one required to achieve the outcome ("target"). The white stars represent the team members closest to the outcome's target level, which also happen to be in the performance quadrant. The red star scores the combined "team ability index" which is derived from the individual team members' ability indexes.
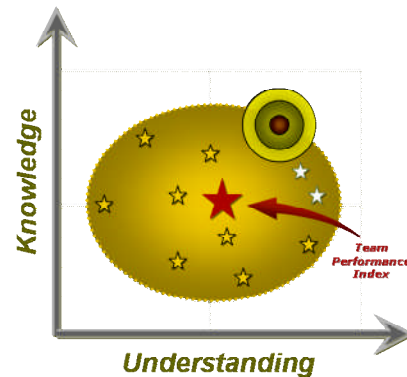

Figure 1 – Team Performance Index

Allowing a team to proceed with a dispersion of ability indexes such as the one shown is a recipe for failure. The disparities in knowledge and understanding would generate many meetings, discussions, and arguments wasting time and effort about the approach to be taken to achieve the outcome.

To achieve optimum performance by a team, the knowledge and understanding relative to achieving each project outcome must be aligned as close as possible as that required by the target outcome; that is, the gaps between knowledge and understanding of the entire team must be minimized.

Knowledge is "inductive" and dominated by the left lobe of the brain; whereas experience & understanding is "deductive" which, combined, determines how team members would work and behave relative to a project outcome.

To determine the team performance index relative to the required outcome (target), one has to start listing the attributes of knowledge and experience (such as leading a team, and ability to work in a

team environment) and assign a weight (importance) to each.

Knowledge   Basic (10%), intermediate (30%), advanced (60%) & expert (100%).

Understanding   Indirect (20%), limited (40%), applied (60%), experienced (100%).

It is not practical or reasonable to expect that all factors needed to achieve an outcome should be at 100% (expert and experienced levels) – that would be delusional.

Once all factors have been listed and weighted, each team member, working independently, ranks him/herself on each of the attributes required. The actual measurements, when factored together, determine the team member ability index, which can be plotted relative to the target.

The individual ability indexes of each team member, when combined with the rest of the team, determine the "**Team Performance Index**" depicted as the large star. In the example, this index indicates that the combined team may perform at about 60% of what is required to achieve the outcome successfully – a likely team failure. It shows three important issues:

1) A gap amongst the knowledge and understanding of team members;

2) A gap between the outcome's K&U requirement and the team's combined ability index (performance index); and

3) A need to determine who is best suited to lead the team to achieve the outcome.

In the example, two individuals appear to be in the best position to lead the efforts of the team (white stars) to achieve the outcome. The determination whether experience has more weight over knowledge may assist in resolving the dilemma about who should lead the team.

Narrowing the Gaps

Determining the team performance index is of little value, unless the project manager takes direct actions to ensure that the team gaps are minimized.

Each factor is analyzed to determine how best to avoid potential problems. Approaches used are training (to narrow gaps in knowledge) or on the job coaching (to narrow gaps in understanding) through the "buddy" approach.

If the team ability indexes spread indicate that the team may fail, the project manager must determine what is the best possible team performance index that could be achieved, through pro-active actions to reducing such gaps.

The "Fit" Dimension

Personalities and working traits tend to affect the ability of the team to work together. For example, one team member may have all the knowledge and experience required but has not shown the ability to communicate and work within a team environment – the "individualistic/solitary worker." Such team qualities must also be understood and resolved by the project manager – via an intuitive ("gut") analysis, for which no deterministic analysis can be used.

The ability of the team to work together, combined with the appropriate leadership and work environment is what creates the conditions for team synergism.

Team Synergism

As discussed above, the wider the gap between the members, the more meetings, discussions, misunderstandings, rework, and frustration the team will inevitably experience. The larger the team the worse it gets. The goal of the team leader is to determine what needs to be done to narrow the gaps, and to make all team members aware and responsible for achieving it.

Figure 2 shows the effect of not having an equalized ability index within a team vs. one that is performing with a normalized ability index. In this example, a team comprised of five members starts a project, each with varying ability indexes (e.g. 5 represents a 50% ratio relative to the combined index of the team based on the additional effort and time required to do the work). When the factors are combined, the performance index is derived. If the team is left alone, it is likely to fail, given the wide gaps amongst them.
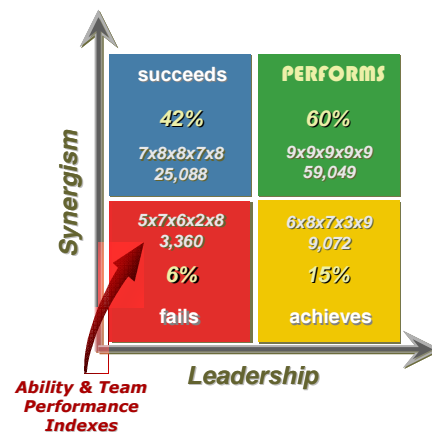

Figure 2 – Team Performance Index

If the project manager is a good leader, he/she can marginally increase the individual performance of team members, but would not likely equalize and narrow the gaps amongst them. The best the

team can do is move to the right, to the "achieve" quadrant, but way below what is required to achieve the outcome.

If the project manager pro-actively addresses the gaps, through the combined efforts of the team to narrow the gaps on their own, it would have the effect of equalizing their ability indexes while the team performs the work (e.g. through on-the-job coaching). It will move the team upwards to the "success" quadrant.

It is utopia to think that a team can perform at 100% of their combined potential all the time. The larger the team working on a particular objective the less efficient it becomes. In this example, what prevents the achievement in excess of 60% relates to a loss of about 5% efficiency for each member added.

Furthermore, individual performance is also impacted by the work environment and the challenges and constraints they face in their private lives.

A Real Example

Twenty years ago, a project that did not have a chance to succeed was in need of a fresh approach to recover it – it was late and well over budget. The team of over 20 was very young that many were considered misfits – no other project wanted them. Some of the members of the team were recent immigrants and were facing serious personal adjustments. No one was adequately trained or had the knowledge, experience, and the understanding to execute the work it was expected of them.

Every team member was convinced that the project would fail and acted quite defensively and critically, protecting their interests. Yet, it became clear that each of them had one common characteristic – the will to succeed. What was needed is to redefine the work as to offset knowledge and experience deficiencies, create an appropriate work environment, apply new work disciplines (based on the second and third team performance principles – Project management 5th Discipline - instill confidence in their abilities, and improve communications to ensure the work was done right the first time, every time.

When errors were made the team collectively rose to fix them and no one was penalized – only hiding them was. The results were amazing – productivity went through the roof, four times above industry standards, and the team managed to resolve huge knowledge, experience gaps and adversities on their own – Superior Team Performance and Synergism was achieved.

Conclusions

In today's projects, multi-disciplinary teams are the norm rather than the exception. This requires examining new approaches to achieve team performance.

Deriving the Ability Index of each team member relative to the outcome to be produced can give you insights about how normalized your team is and who should lead it – Authority of Knowledge and Understanding.

Achieving superior team performance is about effective leadership and communications, through the application of the four performance realization principles. The equalization of the knowledge and understanding of each team member, relative to each project outcome, has a significant impact on team performance.

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References

[i] *Performance Project Management 5th Discipline* http://www.prsl.ca/pdf/PPMWPPJM5DISCIP_V5.pdf