Fostering Project Team Collaboration

Gain High-Performance Results Across Six Dimensions

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1112 words

Project team leaders have an increasingly complex job helping their teams sustain high performance. Teams are scattered across time-zones, countries, and continents. They often rely on subject matter experts who themselves are spread across multiple projects and have primary jobs and responsibilities to manage. Getting your team to coalesce and perform is largely a function of how well you can foster collaboration.

Collaboration can be a tricky and complex element of the overall project team performance equation. This article suggests you consider six dimensions to the collaboration factor in that equation:

1. Shared Workspace

2. Communications Support

3. Document Management

4. Project Planning & Control

5. Demand Management

6. Stakeholder Management

Collaboration is always important between team members, but becomes particularly important when your team has the challenge of spanning geographies, cultures, time zones, or organizations. Any combination of those challenges creates barriers to performance and delivery that you can't ignore. However recent industry studies show that on-line collaboration tools improve project progress communications, reduce response time to stakeholder requests, shorten the project life cycle, increase ownership and accountability for deliverables, and yield better record keeping and documentation. Which tools you choose and where you apply effort and training for your team might be dictated by performance along one or more of these dimensions.

Shared Workspace allows the group to work concurrently and see the current state of that work in real time. Elements of this dimension include tools like team calendars, threaded discussion forums, wiki pages, and issue / defect tracking and status reporting applications.

Communications Support spans many elements. These provide responsive communication channels that are both synchronous (web meeting rooms or chat sessions) or non-synchronous (eMail, internal team messaging, or publish/ subscribe, as in web syndication). Two key aspects of this dimension that lead to vital, healthy teams are key. First, there should be a method for the team members to monitor on-line presence of one another to know when a team mate is available. Closely related then, is a means for shifting communications modes as needs and the project dictate. Thus if I'm responding to a discussion thread posting, and then discover a key subject matter expert is now on-line, I might shift to a chat session to explore a question relevant to my post in progress. If I discover we really need to discuss the question, I might then shift to a one-on-one phone call or even an impromptu n-way teleconference. An environment rich in communication tools to help make these kinds of interactions flow easily will greatly benefit your team.

Document Management (DM) is a part of every project. However when faced with a dispersed team and a situation where documents are being jointly created, perhaps in a wiki environment, then providing high-end DM features easily across the breadth of the team gets to be imperative. Be sure to offer web-delivered capability to upload and download material. Check-in / check-out, version control, and access to previous versions are all important features.

Project Planning & Control is kind of obvious, but consider how project information is stored and delivered to the team. Information about scheduling, work authorizations, time tracking, task progress tracking and the like need to be available to the team in real time, with a minimum of fuss and effort. Further most of these elements demand a two-way flow of information. Your collaboration environment needs to support that!

Demand Management is all about keeping up with the requests of multiple stakeholders, keeping up with resource planning and availability, and working the responses and project plans. Your tools should provide features for your stakeholders to submit and get confirmations automatically. You will need a process and the tools to rapidly assess, triage, and coordinate demands on the inbound side. Work in progress and status of existing requests needs to be tracked and reported. To make it all work effectively, the entire team needs to see the pipeline of requests and respond to those that are assigned.

Stakeholder Management is where the PM spends a tremendous amount of effort. Any work that can be effectively transferred to the natural process of completing the project's tasks is work off the desk and calendar of the PM. If your collaboration systems can compile and deliver information needed by various stakeholders that benefits everyone. Project web sites with pages set up for stakeholder groups, dynamically generated by the information collection systems considered in the other elements can be very beneficial. Offering Web Syndication (RSS feeds and the like) or broadcasting reports via eMail lists may be helpful. Various Customer Resource Management applications can provide sophisticated and tailored responses for your stakeholder groups to what ever granularity you need.

These solutions don't require you to get a capital authorization and spend a lot of money, or build your own private IT support organization. Effective tools for each of these dimensions of collaboration support are available in the Open Source world, and some of these are suggested in the summary table that follows:

Dimension	Element	Suggestion
Shared Workspace	Calendaring	dotProject (http://dotproject.net)
	Project / Task logging	CivicSpace (http://civicspacelabs.org)
	Threaded Discussion	
	Lessons Learned / FAQs	Eventum (http://eventum.mysql.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)
	Group Authoring (Wiki)	
	Issue / Risk Tracking	
Communications Support	Messaging	dotProject (auto eMail, forums) CivicSpace (team messaging, CRM system, mail list management, eMail broadcasting) Eventum (auto eMail) Jabber (IM) (http://www.jabber.org/)
	Discussion Forums	
	Presence Monitoring	
	Publish / Subscribe	
Document Management	Repository	dotProject (complete functionality) Eventum (files attachment to issues, eMail submission of requests supported) CivicSpace (files upload / download)
	Check-in / Check-out	
	Versioning	
	Files Upload / Download	
	Attaching Files to elements	
Project Planning & Control	Project Planning & Scheduling	dotProject (full functionality)
	Dependency Tracking	Eventum (tickets can be

Dimension	Element	Suggestion
	Resource Management	assigned to releases, time tracking)
	Task Progress Tracking	
	Project Tracking	
	Issue / Risk tracking	
	Time Tracking	
	Release Management	
Demand Management	Request Capture	dotProject
	Portfolio Views	
	Reporting	Eventum
	Risk / Issue / Defect Status Tracking	
Stakeholder Management	Announcements	CivicSpace with CiviCRM
	eMail Broadcasting	
	Status Reporting	(CiviCRM: http://www.openngo.org/)
	Contact List Management	

The author has implemented these tools in a demonstration site to allow others to kick the tires and test drive. These are all hosted on a single, inexpensive intel box that is technically straight forward to plug into a company intranet without fuss or complication or architectural adjustments. Check out http://www.washburn-pmg.com/ProjectSite/ to review the suggested applications.

Building an integrated and sophisticated collaboration environment for your project team does not have to be difficult or expensive. The benefits will power the high-performance collaboration team you need to get todays complex projects delivered successfully.