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How a Diverse, Effective Team is the Only Way to Overcome Complexity

We live and execute projects in an increasingly complex world. In this world, freak events happen beyond normal statistical variation. Still we need to deliver results. Traditional detailed scheduling and analytical approaches cannot tackle complexity beyond a certain threshold. Increasingly, research shows that the real solution is a dedicated, effective team that is diverse and integrated.

Project complexity steadily increases in an ever more complex world. Supply chains become global, increasing the possibility of upsets, transportation mishaps, and lack of coordination due to remoteness. It is now common to have half of a project built on one side of the world and the other half on the other side. Projects involve multiple cultures, languages and ways of working. Large projects can span up to a decade, during which wars, terrorism can change significantly the shape of the world. How can anyone expect to be even remotely successful in these activities?

Have the right people with you to deal with uncertainty

All organizations have to face these issues. Jim Collins, the famous author of 'Good to Great' has been studying for years what makes organizations particularly successful. He summarizes his findings as follows: *"The greatest decisions were not "what" but "who?", they were people decisions!."*

Most of the most successful organizations have implemented drastic changes in the way they were doing business to respond to the changes in the world –

while still retaining their values and purpose. Once again, Jim Collins stresses how the team is critical to this success in a complex world:

"Fundamentally, the world is uncertain. Decisions are about the future and your place in the future when that future is uncertain. So what is the key thing you can do to prepare for that uncertainty? You can have the right people with you!."

The effective team

Of course, it is not enough to have just a collection of people together with you to face uncertainty. These people need to operate as an effective, performing team. A team where people have confidence in each other and where all are dedicated to the purpose of the team. It is a team where difficult discussions can happen, people can express what they think, and be resolved without leaving sour tastes: *"It all begins with having the right people - those who can debate in search of the best answers but who can set aside their disagreements and work together for the success of the enterprise!"*

Beyond the usual Tuckman model² of team development, there are a number of important parameters in getting a team become really exceptionally performing. We will stress here two major aspects which are often forgotten in project teams:

- Diversity: it is essential to have in the team the largest diversity of cultures and world-views, of decision-making styles, of age, of backgrounds. While this will require more time and effort to move the team from its creation to a performing stage, it is essential for appropriate decision making in uncertainty, where it is often all about doing things differently than what worked in the past;
- Leveraging hidden talents: effective teams often become effective because team members don't do what they were originally supposed to do. They help other team members in their tasks if they can be more effective and might even take on unusual, non-descript roles that are critical to the team success. In other worlds, effective teams don't limit themselves to their job description.

Of course, a critical aspect of reaching an effective team is co-location and time spent together. In modern world, where virtual teams are often considered, this might be a challenge. However all successful organizations have a

core team that is collocated and spends a sizeable time together, face-to-face, and this is still much needed for effective teams.

Effective team leadership is about fostering conflict for sound decision-making

How does decision-making work in effective teams? *"Decision making is not about consensus. It depends on conflict, and that is the key. What we found in companies that made good decisions is that the debate is real." "It is real, violent debate in search of understanding". "Then, in the end, the leader makes the call. It's conflict and debates leading to an executive decision. No major decision we've studied was ever taken at a point of unanimous agreement. There was always some disagreement in the air!"*

Effective team leadership is about knowing how to foster debate, which in an effective team can appear to be highly conflict-laden. People might literally scream at each other in good faith because they all look for the best way for the organization. And at the same time, leadership is about being able to take a decision whenever taking a decision is needed, even if there no consensus.

Diverse, integrated teams with a large degree of autonomy are the best response to the unpredictability of complexity

Effective team leadership requires the ability to do emotional work at a high grade. In an uncertain world fraught with dangers, the ability of the team to challenge the known, the plan, when needed, is key to success.

Application to complex project leadership

These findings from organizational research can readily apply to large, complex projects. It is tough to reach the level of effective project teams, and often in the face of urgency, project leaders do not take the time to ensure the team is diverse enough and do not allow people to express their talents beyond their job descriptions.

Because in complex projects, the analytical planning and execution approaches do not work, and because agility is needed to confront inevitable sudden unexpected events, the ability to foster conflict and discussion to find unconventional solutions and the ability to take decisions in that context are critical skills of the project leader.

There are ways to overcome these issues, by ensuring in particular that at the project start-up phase:

- the diversity of the team is assessed and confirmed (using simple tools to identify working style preferences, and ensuring cultural and gender diversity as appropriate to the project context)
- sufficient time is given to team-building; not only through conventional teambuilding events, but by getting the team to participate to the project planning and organization building through a series of workshops where those important issues will be discussed and agreed
- the project team needs to be integrated and given its own space far away from the politics of departments or even from the different organizations the team members might originate from.
- The team is autonomous: it is important to leave project teams take the right decisions for themselves. There will always high value decisions that need to be reported to management, as well as the overall health of the project; however it is important to give the team a large autonomy in their decision-making.

Then during the project execution, it should be recognized that the emphasis of the project team will

change and that the organization needs to evolve as a consequence. Rather than hiring new people it is often better to continue with the same team if it is effective, with team members being supported by the relevant experts and taking evolving roles.

Allow Conflict but no Blame

There is sometimes a fine line between conflict and blame. In complex projects, tough events will challenge the team's spirit. The team needs to find solutions and move through a period of constructive conflict discussion. However if for some reason blame is allowed to grow, it is the beginning of the end. In our experience, 100% of the projects where blame has developed do fail – because then the team is dysfunctional.

The art of the project leader is to foster creative conflict and avoid at all times blame to develop. It is a tough challenge in particular if the team feels that some members have shown

weaknesses that impact the overall project success; still, if there would be one focus of the project leader in those tough situations, it would be to eradicate any hint of blame immediately before it would grow and potentially strangle the team.

The main ingredient for success in complex projects is the team. Nurture it.

The Team is the central success factor for complex projects. Don't underestimate its influence on the final result. Diverse, integrated teams with a large degree of autonomy are the best response to the unpredictability of complexity. Project leaders need to know how to foster the right team build-up, foster creative conflict, do powerful emotional work in decision-making, and above all, make sure that blame will never take root.

In these conditions, project teams will do extraordinary things.

Notes

- 1 – From the foreword to the book *"Fortune: the Greatest Business Decisions of all Time"*.
- 2 – The Tuckman model involves the four stages of Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing; to which the fifth step of Adjourning is now often added.

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