

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

The Winning Team & Project Success

by Harvey A. Levine

What a Team!

I was born in The Bronx, in the shadows of the House That Ruth Built. So it was natural that I became a Yankees fan. It was easy to do that. My father did business with Yankee Stadium, and I could get into the games – sometimes for free. It didn't hurt that they were traditionally a winning team. Any sports fan appreciates a winner. Hey! It was fun being a Yankees fan. Even if the past few years have been far from perfect, they are still a perennial winner.

A dynasty? Yes, I guess you can say that. A winner because they had the largest payroll? Let's be careful here. Yes, they did have the largest payroll. But that isn't necessarily the reason for their winning ways. Surely the money helps. But there are other teams that have high payrolls and can't win to save themselves (the NY Rangers hockey team, for example). All that money that the Texas Rangers spent for A-rod didn't help either. It's more than just the money.

What Teamwork!

To look at the NY Yankees is to see a collection of good athletes who will use their abilities in whatever way it helps to achieve the objective – that is: to win ballgames. Some team members are truly superior performers. Others are just so-so. But together, they seem to do whatever it takes to be a contender. You don't see any bickering. You don't see any strutting around. These highly individualistic overachievers can curb their ego-oriented tendencies to play as a team.

The situation on projects is not that different (except for the player's salaries).

What is a Team?

In the most generic sense, we can say that a team is “a group of people, working together to achieve a common goal”. Again, generically, we attribute certain characteristics to teams, such as:

- Teams can accomplish something that individuals cannot.
- Teams are not a natural group, such as a family, an ethnic clan, or an economic pool, but rather are brought together in a temporary association.
- Each team member has unique, specialized capabilities that contribute to achievement of the goal.
- Team members can subrogate their individual needs to the needs of the team.

- Team members will willingly accept direction from a team leader (as long as the leader has the respect of the team and that there is a reasonable consensus on the objectives and the strategies to meet the objectives).

More (Less Wholesome) Attributes

Unfortunately, the ideal characteristics of a team do not always materialize on the project. As in the case of some of the other high paid teams in sports, the players more selfish interests often take over.

- Some people have a “zero-sum” mentality. They feel that any gain by a team member is a loss to another.
- The “zero-sum” members will drag down the team. Their actions are driven by fear and jealousy.
- Some top performers are egocentric. A “the world revolves around me” attitude is detrimental to the team.
- Other good performers may be “loners”. They have difficulty sharing, and communicating. They drop the baton during the hand-off.

Problem Areas:

- **Personalities:** Often, the best technical contributors are the least social. They may tend not to network or work well in teams. If you have a choice in the selection of team members, look for a balance. If you don't have a choice, try to be aware of each member's social personality and be proactive in promoting participation that enhances the team's potential for success.
- **Egos:** We look for team members who can provide unique expertise at a high level. But, superior knowledge may get in the way. Such egocentric individuals may show reluctance to accept leadership from someone with less technical expertise.
- **Goals:** It is normal for team members to have different individual goals. We need to address the potential conflict between project goals and individual goals. Similarly, each team member may have a different definition of success.
- **Conflicting Demands:** Some team members may be working in more than one group, on multiple projects. They may face continual conflicting demands on their time, by different team leaders. Also, remember that the best people are the most in demand.

Remedies

- Make sure that there is a clear understanding of level of commitment (time) for each team member. If the individual is on more than one team, all team leaders must communicate their contribution expectations from the individual and agree on how they will share.
- Hold an open discussion of expected contributions and rewards with each team member. Balance expectations and needs.

- Skilled professionals perform because they want to, not because they have to. When providing support for “dotted-line” managers (such as project managers in a matrix environment), it helps immensely to recognize what the team members want to get out of their participation in the project, and to provide a clear opportunity for these ends to be supported.
- Establish communication methods that match the team situation. Make sure that all team members understand the communication methods and what is expected from them in way of communication.
- Hold frequent, periodic discussions with each team member about how both their and your expectations are being met. Include a review of performance, noting both positive accomplishments and areas needing improvement. This provides an opportunity for praise, where warranted, and to address issues while there is time for corrective action. For the best results, praise in public, critique in private.
- Publish a clear statement of project objectives
 - Defined as deliverables
 - Defined in terms of stakeholder satisfaction
 - Defined in areas of time, cost, quality, etc.
- Reach consensus on objectives and commitment to support.
- Recognize diversity and leave room for personal styles (as long as they support the team and the eventual goals).
- Provide opportunity for personal achievement and recognition.
- Celebrate achievement.
- Team Leaders must learn to lead with knowledge power rather than position power. They are consensus builders and expert communicators.
- Team leaders should not necessarily assume that they are the best experts in each and every discipline. An orchestra conductor does not play all of the instruments. But rather strives to direct each performer to excel.
- Make sure that everyone knows: Who Does What.

Shared Rewards

In the traditional system, we give individuals responsibility and a list of expectations. We then measure performance and distribute rewards. We expect the rewards to motivate performance. When there is shared responsibility and expectations, such as may exist in the team environment, we often maintain the individual measurement and rewards system. This promotes individual performance over team performance. This is counterproductive. A method of measuring and rewarding contributions to success, as a team, should be implemented.

The reward system, even when designed to recognize the accomplishment of teams, must never forget that each member of the team is an individual. Each person requires

recognition as an individual as well as a team member, and each person will have reward needs based on that person's specific needs and expectations. While the shared rewards should recognize shared results, they need not be cookie-cutter rewards, but rather provide for equal rewards based on individual preferences.

The Winning Team

Teams, in various formats, are a common and practical arrangement for bringing people together to execute a project. Only the most reactionary multiproject enterprise would attempt to execute projects with rigid boundaries, and totally dedicated resources. Sharing is much more efficient, as long as it is done right. Call them project teams, task forces, self-directed teams, managed groups, whatever – these represent a potential for more efficient and effective utilization of human resources.

There is just as great a potential to botch everything up. If the team leaders, the team members, and the involved line managers don't recognize and address the issues associated with working with teams, the potential gains will be lost. This is not "business as usual".

Teams consist of individuals working together, in a temporary group, to achieve a goal. A balance must be struck between project and individual needs.

*Note: For additional reading on teams, team psychology, and shared rewards, read Section 13, in the author's book: "**Practical Project Management: Tips, Tactics, and Tools**"; John Wiley & Sons, 2002.*

About the Author:**Harvey A. Levine**

Harvey A. Levine, with 44 years of service to the project management industry, is founder of The Project Knowledge Group, a consulting firm specializing in the dissemination of PM knowledge through writing, training, mentoring and direct consulting. He has implemented or enhanced the project management capabilities of numerous firms, often combined with the selection or implementation of computerized project management tools. For more information on Harvey Levine or the Project Knowledge Group, please visit <http://home.earthlink.net/~halevine/>. Mr. Levine is the author of three books, and over 240 articles, whitepapers and videos on Project Management. His 2002 book, "Practical Project Management: Tips, Tactics, and Tools", is still available from John Wiley & Sons. Mr. Levine's latest book, "Project Portfolio Management, A Practical Guide to Selecting Projects, Managing Portfolios, and Maximizing Benefits", Jossey-Bass, was released in July, 2005. Mr. Levine is past president and chair of the Project Management Institute (PMI®), a recipient of PMI's 1989 Distinguished Contribution to Project Management award, and has been elected a Fellow of PMI. He was Contributing Editor to PMI's PM Network for thirteen years and has contributed to dozens of periodicals and websites dedicated to project management. He is a popular keynote speaker and panel chair, as well as presenter of workshops and problem solving sessions in the private and public sectors. Mr. Levine has been an early supporter of Project Portfolio Management practices and has promoted PPM through books, articles, presentations, and individual mentoring and consulting. Mr. Levine has offices in Saratoga Springs, New York and San Diego, California. Harvey can be contacted at [**halevine@earthlink.net**](mailto:halevine@earthlink.net).

Additional information about Harvey Levine can be found at <http://www.pmforum.org/pm%20forum%20team/index.htm#3>.