

Emotionally Intelligent Project Teams

By Susan de la Vergne

Project Teams in the Hot Seat

Nowhere in an organization is sensational or terrible teamwork more evident than on projects. Of course, teamwork matters in most areas of business, where teams perform critical operational duties that depend on collaborative relationships and cohesive groups working well together.

But what sets project teams apart from operational teams is that they are temporary, highly interdependent (usually) and cross-functional. Project teams often incorporate several different disciplines, where software developers, procurement specialists, financial controllers and security analysts may all be trying to walk arm-in-arm towards the same finished product. Yet their contributions to the work are very different.

Then there's the added complexity, with growing frequency, that teams are multi-national and often spread across geography and time zones. Trying to make all that gel in the time a project team is together—because, remember, a project team is a *temporary* unit—is tough.

The relative success of a project depends in large measure on the success of these temporary, interdependent, far-flung, multi-discipline teams. A dysfunctional project team practically guarantees cost overruns and schedule delays and can even result in a project's being cancelled altogether – an expensive and damaging last resort.

What's the difference between teams that sail or fail? One answer is whether the team, as a unit, is “emotionally intelligent.” Do they handle adversity well—as a team? Do they know themselves? Can they depend on each other? Do they have a team reputation? Do they share a purpose and an esprit de corps? These are the critical elements of team emotional intelligence (team EI).

Emotionally Intelligent Teams

Emotional intelligence is the hard science of soft skills, built on a physiological understanding of the brain chemistry behind emotional understanding and behavior. First appearing as a term and a concept in the 1920s, Emotional Intelligence was popularized 70 years later by Daniel Goleman whose books *Emotional Intelligence* and *Working with Emotional Intelligence* brought the topic into range for readers from many walks of life.

Professionals working in complex organizations recognized the phenomenon right away.

The best project teams have a collective Emotional Intelligence (EI) working for them that promotes collaboration in pursuit of a shared goal. In *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman says a team with the right EI for the job:

- Models positive qualities (e.g., respect, helpfulness, cooperation);
- Draws everyone into active, enthusiastic participation;
- Creates a team identity, esprit de corps and sense of commitment;
- Protects the group and its reputation, as well as shares the credit.

Another couple of prominent EI researchers, Vanessa Urch Druskat and Steven Wolff, in their article “Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups” (*Harvard Business Review*, March 2001) have even more to say on the subject. They say teams with EI:

- Acknowledge and monitor emotion;
- Discriminate about emotions and attend to them;
- Collectively believe their team can be effective.

That teams exist at an emotional level (as well as at intellectual and operational levels) is a fact, and whether project leadership likes it or not, a team’s emotional constitution has a lot to do with how successful the project is. Understanding EI characteristics—belief in team effectiveness, commitment, cooperation, etc.—is one way project leaders can help to develop it in others.

Doing Something Useful—Now

But because project teams are temporary, there isn’t much time to develop these qualities, and there’s even less time to address dysfunction when it’s discovered. It’s important to get at the real drivers of team harmony right away. But what are they?

Of course, there are several answers to that question—from inspiring a shared vision to promoting cross-cultural understanding. But let’s say we have to zoom in on just a couple of areas because we’re going to triage the situation. Here are two:

- *Building cross-functional understanding about what people on the team do*
- *Making sure peer-to-peer accountabilities are understood*

They’re related, of course. They’re about teams getting to know each other in the context of the project. Team EI relies heavily on trust among team members, but trust takes *time*, which is one thing project teams don’t have in excess.

While there’s no substitute for time and experience in building trust, it can be accelerated a bit with some conscious attention. This isn’t an add-water-and-stir formula for building trust on a team, but it’s a good first step, one that project managers should not only encourage but should make happen.

Project managers should start by making sure the team has a generally accepted understanding of who does what, where the boundaries and hand-offs are for work assignments.

Project Role Descriptions

Even when projects follow rigorous methodologies (and certainly when they don't), there's often confusion among project team members about who's doing what.

“Am I leading the design review? I'm just the Design Team Lead. I thought the Architecture group manager was supposed to do that.”

“What do you mean you're 'testing requirements'? We don't test requirements, and certainly that's not what *you* do. That's an analyst's responsibility. You're a tester.”

And so on. Every project suffers some confusion around roles, boundaries, responsibilities and hand-offs.

If you want to be sure people drop right into uncertainty and misunderstanding, just let them assume they know what everyone else on the team is doing—and when and for whom and with what authority. But if you don't want people to slog through this confusion, and you do want them to build a good foundation for trust, try this:

Develop descriptions of each of the roles people play on projects. By phase, what activities and tasks do individuals—in their roles—perform on projects.

These aren't job descriptions. They're descriptions of *project roles*, and a complete repository won't have more than 20 or so. Architect, Test Lead, Design Lead, Tester, Business Analyst, Project Manager, etc.

The finished product is one concise page describing each role, which you can align with whatever methodology you use. For one-page role description, you could include work phase name/number, deliverable (i.e., what the individual in this role does on or for the deliverable), and any additional comments relevant to that role in that phase. For example:

DESIGN TEAM LEAD ROLE DESCRIPTION

Work Phase	Deliverable	Additional Activities, Comments
300 Preliminary Technical Design	Responsible for team's portion of Tech Design document.	Scope is limited to purview of specific work stream (e.g., networking, middleware, infrastructure). Team Lead coordinates preparation of materials by other team members, hands off completed product to overall Project Manager. Has final review/edits over Design Team specific contents.
400 Product Evaluation	Participates in evaluation of products; completes Evaluation Matrix.	Coordinates input from team to develop one Evaluation Matrix from entire team. Turns in final eval to PM.

What could you do with such a useful thing?

1. Hand out to new people (new to the organization or new to projects).
2. Have everyone read when a project gets underway (whether they're new or not);
3. Use as a reference source to anticipate or resolve disputes;
4. Use as a foundation for a project plan.

One other good thing: It's not a high-maintenance repository because project roles don't change very often. So if you're worried this is just one more thing to maintain, don't fret. It's easy.

The point of this deliverable is simply to clarify confusion and help people on teams create a shared identity. Articulating roles prevents misunderstandings and establishes accountabilities among peers, a great foundation for building trust—which is a critical element to establishing team EI.

[Emotional Intelligence: A Guide for Project Managers](#)