

The “3 P’s and a C” of effective teams - Part 2: Hitches and Endings

Overview

In the previous article we looked at getting a new team off to a good start using the Purpose, Process, People and Context model. Even if you focus on these four areas from the start, there is no guarantee that all will run smoothly. Why not? Because we are dealing with people. And when we deal with people we work in areas of uncertainty. That is what makes working in teams so interesting (or frustrating, depending on what sort of day you are having!). So we are going to look at typical challenges that arise when working in a team, tips on how to handle those challenges, and what to do when it is time for a team to disband.

Before we do that though, did you have a think about what makes the teams you have been in effective or not? And did you do one thing to contribute to a team’s effectiveness? If not, what stopped you? Taking responsibility to improve things is vital to being an effective team member.

Purpose, People, Process and Context

We can use the “3 P’s and a C” model to help us understand the challenges a team might experience. I was once brought into a cross-functional project team some time after it had already got going. I spent a couple of meetings being confused about what it was we were trying to achieve and how. Everyone else seemed to be getting on with their agreed actions and things were happening but I was unsure where it was all heading. Not being the sort of person to sit there quietly, I spoke to a couple of people about my concerns after the meeting. It transpired that I was not the only person to be confused and frustrated. So I spoke to the team leader and we agreed to go back to the start and redefine what the project was about, what needed to happen and what the reason for it was. After a couple of painful meetings we had greater clarity but continuing frustration. Why? It became clear that this project was not actively supported by the organisation. Without that support most of the team members felt that they had better things to put their time into. The project was soon after disbanded.

So there was:

- Lack of clarity around the purpose. (**Purpose**)
- A change in people on the team and failure to ensure new members understood what the project was about. (**People**)
- Unwillingness of team members to actively question each other about the purpose of the project. Instead they were

focused on ticking off the actions and held back from expressing their concerns. (**Process**)

- Lack of awareness, and therefore no involvement, from wider organisation and leadership. (**Context**)

Most teams will at some point experience issues such as these. We can limit them. What we need to do is notice when things are going off track and intervene. So regardless of the type of issue that arises, the one big thing team members need to do is be willing to say something when they notice or feel that the team is not working effectively. And we need to be clear about what we mean by 'effectively' because this isn't about everyone getting on and being good friends. In fact sometimes when team members get on really well they overlook issues because they prefer to maintain harmony.

Four typical challenges

Change in team members - Ensure that someone is allocated to get the person up to speed as quickly as possible. If this is your day-to-day team then that is likely to be the supervisor but does not always need to be. Where the team is brought together for a specific purpose, e.g. to work on a matter or a project, then having a 1 page document outlining the purpose of the team, team members, any guidelines, details of where extra information can be found, etc. would be a useful thing for a new member to refer to.

Loss of focus – Sometimes we think we know what we are doing and then somewhere down the line it changes. This might be because the client changes their mind, our organisation changes priorities, or indeed, we actually just realise that what we originally set out to do was not the thing we needed to do. Stop. Listen to that nagging doubt. Share it with the rest of the team and encourage open discussion. Then refocus.

Non-delivery – A team member is just not doing what is expected of them. Not once, but several times, and on important things. Depending on the structure and openness of the team, either the team leader or the whole team needs to speak to this person. If reasonable justifications are forthcoming, do something to help them. If not, their supervisor needs to be managing their performance and/or if appropriate, the team needs to seek a replacement. There is not the space here to go into performance management and handling feedback so if you are unsure, seek advice.

Falling out – We cannot always get on with everyone. Nor is it necessary for everyone to be good friends when working together. However we do need to maintain respect for each other and not resort to playground behaviour. Unfortunately human beings seem destined to find ways to undermine, ridicule, dislike and even hate each other.

If you have spent time at the start getting to understand each other and agreeing on how to handle disagreements, then falling out should be less of an issue. If you have not spent that time, or even though you have it still goes wrong, then do not ignore what is going on. Team members who have fallen out need to discuss and agree a way forwards. Big issues may require mediation. Encourage an environment where it is ok to raise disagreements constructively. Ignore the interpersonal side and well, simply, you no longer have a team.

Endings

Teams do end. Clearly teams set up for a specific finite purpose such as a project will have an end point. Your day-to-day team is different. It is unlikely to have a clear end point but it may change due to restructures. Arguably a change in team members can bring a team to an end even if the team still exists in name and function. There are two key things to remember about the end of teams:

1. Recognise when it is time for the team to end. For a project team this might be after there has been a formal review of how the project went. Not before. The review is very important to learn what worked and what to do differently next time.
2. Celebrate, commiserate or at least acknowledge the end. However, fun or painful membership of a team might have been, there is usually a sense of loss. Yes people will have mixed emotions. Some may be relieved and delighted. Others may be disappointed and upset. Acknowledging the end as a team is part of the ritual of endings that human beings go through in life. Anything from a simple thank you around the room through to a night out can be worthwhile.

And so....

We come to our end. As a team member or a team leader, take time to consider how effective your teams are. Be responsible for suggesting where improvements could be made. If you think that you need to understand more about how teams work or want to develop your skills in this area, there are plenty of books, internet resources and training courses. Ask your colleagues for ideas. Most of all, do something differently to support your teams.

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