Enabling Productive Working Environments for Remote Cross-Corporate Project Teams

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When team members work together on a project, conflict and difficulties can always arise—both from inside and outside the team.

Add a company border to the mix—and it will get even more complicated. Not only differing viewpoints among team members and unfair treatment of people by leaders can lead to tension now, but also diverging company cultures and communication barriers created by a contractual work environment: People talk to a customer differently than they would to a colleague in their own company. Sometimes, they don't talk at all.

Project team
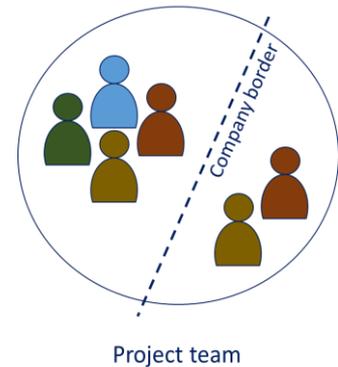
While there is probably no way to simply eliminate such barriers by pretending everyone is on the same team and that's it—no problem!—there are possibilities to mitigate the tensions, the awkwardness, the lack of trust, the cross-company conflicts.

In this text, we will explore these possibilities along three factors to foster in cross-corporate project teams:

1. Collaboration and trust
2. Motivation
3. Common goals

Let's look at them in detail.

1. Collaboration and trust

Imagine you are a project manager with not enough in-house resources to create and deliver what is needed. While you are looking for external man- and womanpower to reinforce your team, you cannot help but think that potential suppliers are not always honest to you. You know that if you make a bad deal with a not so trustworthy company, this will endanger your project and make you look very bad to boot. You would have to meticulously select a trustworthy seller and screen them to avoid that. However, the project service you need is rarely offered on the market. You will have to choose one of the few companies who can even offer this to you currently. So you go with someone where your gut feeling is not as bad as with some of the competitors—the lesser of the evils so to speak. This dominates the entire collaboration from the beginning.

Contractual negotiations are tough. Promises made by the supplier to win the deal were bloomy. The new project team is setup with people partially on-site and partially in a remote location. They are going into the new adventure with a certain amount of distrust that the work will be done as expected, as well as with enough honesty, openness, and high quality. The people working for the service provider wonder whether their colleagues working for the customer organization will treat them with enough respect and if they are technologically savvy enough to really know what they want and need out of the project. In short, there are two paradigms waving above their heads:

- On customer side: "Our external provider people are a bit two-faced"
- On supplier side: "Our contacts on customer side don't know what they're doing"

They are even reluctant to refer to each other as "team mates". As a result, conflict is almost inevitable.

Speed Leas is an author of books helping people to navigate through conflicts in church groups who shared insights so helpful that they have been referenced a lot in management literature as well. In his 1985 book "Moving Your Church Through Conflict"[1], he describes five stages of team conflict that he had often come to witness:

Conflict Levels acc. to Speed Leas (1985)

- **Level 1: Problem to Solve** 🛠️
  Everyday frustrations and aggravations → Constructive disagreement that characterizes high-performing teams – **Possible strategy to navigate this level: Trying to find consensus**

- **Level 2: Disagreement** ⛈️
  Self-protection becomes as important as solving the problem → Intransparency and confusion about what's really happening – **Possible strategy: Offering support and reassurance**

- **Level 3: Contest** 💪
  Prior conflicts and problems remain unresolved → Black and white, blaming – **Possible strategy: Trying to accommodate and find compromise, enter negotiations, take emotions out by focusing on facts**

- **Level 4: Crusade** ⌗
  Resolving the situation isn't good enough → Team's identity gets trounced, attack for affiliations rather than ideas, overall attitude is righteous and punitive – **Possible strategy: Acing as a mediator and using diplomat tactics in order to de-escalate**

- **Level 5: World War** 🪖
  "Destroy!" is the battle cry → No constructive outcome is possible any more – **Possible strategy: Trying last-resort peacekeeping strategies to protect the people; getting everyone out of the war zone might actually be the best option**

The theory further states that while levels 1-3 are fairly normal for teams to go through every now and then (compare to Tuckman's "storming" stage[2]), stages 4-5 can be downright dangerous for project success and probably much more importantly, for the mental health of the people involved. Having experienced world war in the workplace is an intense experience and a memory never again forgotten. It is also something often covered up and smoothed over in communications outside the team, making the conflict situation even more explosive.

From my own experience at a trainer in various companies and lines of business, I have made the observation that when people do admit to have reached level 5 in their daily work life as a team, this mostly involves a collaboration with an external company. Company-internal teams usually shift more between levels 1 through—maximum—4.

This highlights how important it is to establish a healthy and collaborative team culture in cross-corporate teams, and also how difficult.

Here are several ideas how such a culture could be fostered:

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[1] Leas, Speed B.: "Moving Your Church Through Conflict", Alban Institute, 1985
[2] Tuckman, Bruce: "Developmental sequence in small groups". Psychological Bulletin. 63 (6): 384–99, 1965

- **Acting with integrity, always**
  A lack of integrity can potentially ruin everything. Consequently, a foundation of trust between a customer and a vendor is laid out with appropriate behavior: Honesty, transparency, fairness towards the other contract party on both sides.

- **Creating a team charter**
  A team charter is a form of team agreement similar to a project charter, but focusing on the team. In it, a team can establish roles, rules, values, goals, and focus of their work (plus what they feel would be a loss of focus, or out-of-scope work for them). They can try to find compromises in case of cultural differences if those are present. They can put down procedures to follow should conflict arise, and escalation paths for people to use (especially important once more than one company is involved). They can define ground rules for collaboration and for a better meeting culture, for example. A template can be found here: Team charter template. The more everyone is involved in the process of setting up the team charter, the more likely they are to follow and respect it. After creation, it can be signed by all members and stored in a highly visible location. Refer to this guide for inspiration: https://www.smartsheet.com/essential-guide-creating-effective-team-charter
  For remote cross-corporate teams, a team charter can especially help foster a feeling of common identity.

- **Setting common project goals to focus on** instead of putting individual company goals first
  See *3. Common goals* for details.

- **Setting up a contract** that is fair and beneficial to all parties
  To find out about possible contract models for agile teams, but also for project teams that want to explore options of collaboration beyond just classical fixed price models, refer to the article "Contracting Models for Agile Projects"[3].

- **Treating collaboration partners fairly**
  This includes not isolating external team members and providing them with obligations and work environments that make it extra hard for them for to work for a customer project constructively and in a motivated way. Unfortunately, such scenarios are not very rare at all.

- **Organizing team-building events…**
  … where the entire team is invited and everyone treated the same. Note that while this option as a singled out measure might not be enough to boost the team spirit—especially if other factors are lacking—, it is a great additional way of helping people bond with each other. It is possible to take a trip to the nearest Escape Room together, but a nice dinner should also do it.

- **Organizing training**
  Training sessions and workshops where the entire team is invited to attend are a great way to both help people connect with each other and understand each other better while also gaining new knowledge and skills.

- **Co-locating (temporarily)**
  The best strategy to help remote teams grow closer together is to co-locate them, meaning to put them all in one location. This is not always possible on a permanent basis: People cannot or do not want to move, costs might explode, several time zones need to be covered in a project, team members being close to a target market is strategically advisable. In such cases, it is generally a good practice to get the team together for an onboarding event. Such an event is recommendable for any new team, but even more helpful for remote teams.

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[3] Lehmann-Benz, Antje: "Contracting Models for Agile Projects" (Project Business Management Series), PMWorld Journal 2019, https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/pmwj79-Feb2019-Lehmann-Benz-Contracting-Models-for-Agile-Projects.pdf (last accessed Jund 26, 2019)

People will be more likely to collaborate well with each other than if they have never met in person before.

Once a foundation of trust and goodwill has been established, the next thing to do is to motivate the project team by keeping their extrinsic and especially their intrinsic motivation up.

2. Motivation

In 1959, Frederick Herzberg et al.[4] asserted that for motivation to occur, team members first need their hygiene factors to be fulfilled. These include a fair salary and an appropriate work place. With these, motivation will not be raised, but without them, it will certainly drop. Therefore, a first step towards creating a motivating atmosphere for a project team will be to take care hygiene factors are all fulfilled.

Once this is the case, motivation can be addressed. According to Dank Pink[5], intrinsic motivation is based on three main factors:

- **Purpose**
  The team has to feel that they are working on the project for a good reason and stand behind that purpose.
- **Mastery**
  Team members need to be sure they can master the challenges and tasks ahead or, if not, that they are enabled to learn how to master them.
- **Autonomy**
  The team needs to be able to take certain decisions alone, especially when it comes to performing and timing their own work, both on individual and on team level. Micro-management often does more damage than good.

Herzberg had named similar factors, including **recognition**, **achievement**, and **personal growth**. Pink's focus on autonomy can be traced to a surge of popularity of self-organization on team level, as pull-system and change agent ideas originally coming from Lean Manufacturing[6] have been steadily spreading in recent decades and incorporated in what is referred to as agile principles and values[7].

A team charter, as described under *1. Collaboration and trust* in this text, can help establish a feeling of purpose for the team, and alignment on a common mission and vision for cross-corporate project team members.

3. Common goals

Even more than company-internal project teams, cross-corporate teams should have guiding principles for their activities. These may include:

- What does project success look like and how will we measure it? Consider trying futurespectives[8] with the entire team at the beginning of the project. They can be revisited approximately half-way through.

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[4] Herzberg, Frederick; Mausner, Bernard; Snyderman, Barbara B.: "The Motivation to Work", John Wiley, 1959.
[5] Pink, Daniel H.: "Drive – The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us", Riverhead Books, 2011.
[6] Wikipedia: "Lean manufacturing", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lean_manufacturing, 2003 (last accessed June 26, 2019).
[7] Kent Beck et al.: „Manifesto for Agile Software Development", http://agilemanifesto.org/, 2001 (last accessed June 26, 2019).
[8] The author of this text recommends the techniques "Remember The Future" (https://www.innovationgames.com/remember-the-future/), "Pre-Mortem" (http://www.funretrospectives.com/pre-mortem-activity), and „Hopes and Concerns"

- From the team's findings, principles can be spelled out for the duration of the project.
- Additionally, the key role that the team plays in the thus defined project success and maybe the entire success of the company can be described.

This will result in a mission statement, a value proposition that can go into the team charter and/or made visible on a board. It should be both tangible and inspiring, meaning it should be easy to grasp, measure, and perform checklists against. A timeline when milestones are intended to be reached on the way to fulfilling the mission and vision could give additional guidance to the team. Remember that they will be most likely to adhere to these goals if they are involved in their definition.

Project team

With measures such as the ones described above, company borders running through project teams will not be entirely eliminated. However, negative effects they could have on behavior in team members might be mitigated.

(http://www.funretrospectives.com/hopes-and-concerns). Find more formats described at
http://www.funretrospectives.com/category/futurespective.