Why Professional Project Management in Your Translation Company?

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Team building refers to

promoting a homogeneous working environment to ensure that a project runs smoothly. Since the project manager is the glue that holds the project together, his or her mission is to make sure that the team is kept properly informed and motivated, and that team members are on good terms with one another in order to achieve high quality and timely results. This is no easy task. This article will touch upon the many details the project manager needs to consider in the organization and development of a dynamic team.

The Project Manager as a Team Builder

So how does a project manager of a translation agency assemble a team of qualified individuals? For starters, the project manager needs to take into account the fact that team members may not be working face-to-face in one physical environment. Nowadays, one of the most common team configurations for activities performed in a translation agency is the virtual environment. This reality poses quite a unique challenge to the project manager: to build a team of invisible freelance participants whose platter is already loaded with other assignments and priorities.[1]

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and despite cultural differences, it is important for team members to feel as if they belong to the group and that their contributions are making a difference. The key, then, is for the project manager to establish an identity[2] for team members and to reinforce a sense of community participation throughout the life of the project. It is this sense of community, in combination with the high professionalism of the team members, that will bring them closer together and drive the project forward. In this respect, experienced translators and project managers have an advantage in that they are already working in the same field, utilize the same industry jargon, and have been brought together to accomplish a common goal.

Interpersonal skills are likewise important to team development. As the third edition of *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* states: "By understanding the sentiments of the team members, anticipating their actions, acknowl-

edging their concerns, and following up on their issues, the team can greatly reduce problems and increase cooperation. Skills such as empathy, influence, creativity, and group facilitation are valuable assets when managing the project team."[3]

Practically speaking, the project manager must understand the goal of the project, clearly communicate it to team members, and make sure that everybody is on the same page in terms of the constraints of quality, time, cost, scope, and customer satisfaction. This common understanding can be facilitated through an initial kickoff meeting. It can then be maintained by holding periodic status meetings, keeping minutes of the discussions, and always being attentive to any signs of trouble that could derail the project. To this end, the project manager should keep the team motivated and informed of the accomplishment of milestones. Even an occasional acknowledgement of some outstanding achievement will suffice.

Doing so will reinforce each member's sense of belonging and will generate a sense of ownership for the project's ultimate success, which is essential to any group effort. By providing a sense of direction and support, the project manager can expect commitment in return.

Risk Assessment

Risk assessment is another vital aspect of project management that should not be taken lightly. A risk is defined as an uncertain event or condition that, if it occurs, has a positive or negative effect on a project's objectives. Not all risks represent threats to the project. In fact, some risks may

effective or possible to develop a proactive response."[5] In fact, unknown risks are mainly a concern of upper management and are often excluded from the project budget. Such risks usually involve changes to the project's scope that require the allocation of a management reserve; therefore, this responsibility is usually beyond the realm of the project manager.

As a first step to implementing an effective risk assessment plan, the translation company should detail how it will deal with risks for its projects. This will serve as the basis for any discussion of risks with vendors as well as clients. Given the different reactions to risk—risk averse, risk

morale? These are some of the questions that the project manager should share with the team and, together, come up with an action plan.

Armed with a clear understanding of the risks in question, a risk response plan can then be drafted to detail the appropriate strategies. If it becomes necessary to deal with negative risks—those that pose a threat to the business—responses will be in place to avoid, transfer, or mitigate the risk. On the other hand, the reaction to positive risks—those that represent an opportunity to the business—may be to exploit, share, or enhance them. In all cases, it is vital to have a plan beforehand in order to react without delay should the risk materialize.

Finally, it is important to monitor risks periodically to determine their status. This is an ongoing process throughout the life of the project. The assumption should be that some risks may very well go away, while new ones may surface.

> ## The project manager is the glue that holds the project together.

bring windfall opportunities that should be pursued in the interest of project goals. Therefore, risk management processes must be implemented. The intent here is to increase the probability and impact of *positive* events, and to decrease the probability and impact of those events that might prove *adverse* to the project.[4] Be sure to keep in mind that any risk must be contained and controlled.

On a side note, be aware that while the current discussion only applies to known risks, the project manager also needs to be aware of unknown risks. "Unknown risks cannot be managed proactively, and a prudent response by the project team can be to allocate general contingency funds against such risks, as well as against any known risks for which it may not be cost-

seeking, and risk neutral—it is important to know the translation company's position on risk in order to set the tone for future action.

Next, risks should be identified and assessed in terms of their probability of occurrence and their impact on the project. By performing quantitative and/or qualitative analyses of the risk, the project manager will be able to rank the pool of risks and determine which ones will receive serious focus. Even trivial and obvious risks should undergo the process. For instance, the client needs 20,000 new words translated a week before the expected return date. What is the probability of that happening? What is the impact on the project schedule? Will the schedule be broken? What about the resources? What is the impact to team

Conflict Resolution

The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (www.m-w.com) defines conflict as: "2a: competitive or opposing action of incompatibles; antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons); 2b: mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands."

By this definition, conflict is an issue that can affect all facets of life, either positively or negatively. Accordingly, conflict can also be a major factor in project management. However, too much conflict can disrupt the normal flow of the project. While some level of conflict is actually necessary for the successful functioning of a team, it must be managed in order to maintain positive working relationships and improve productivity.   ➡

Can conflict be avoided altogether? According to Rita Mulcahy, a worldwide authority on project management, "Conflict is unavoidable because of the nature of the projects trying to address the needs and requirements of many stakeholders, the limited power of the project manager, and the necessity of obtaining resources from functional managers."[6]

It is commonly assumed that personality is the main source of conflict in a project: the project manager cannot see eye to eye with the client; there are disagreements on the cost and scope of the project; or the project manager is having trouble resolving differences among the team's large pool of freelancers. However, this is not the case. In fact, the seven categories of conflict,

others. This technique is considered an "I win, you lose" scenario, and it is mainly used when quick decisions need to be made.

Smoothing: Emphasis is placed on the agreements rather than on the disagreements. Although the issue is not really resolved, this technique is helpful when the health of the relationship is more important than being right or having the last word on the matter.

Compromising: The parties try to find solutions that may please everybody involved. This is certainly not the best approach because each party feels like it has given up something dear.

parties with opposing interests hold conversations to settle a dispute. As stated in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence:* "Research on games theory and the decision-making process suggest that the face-to-face conversation involved in direct negotiation may actually influence people to act in the interest of the group (including the opposing party), or some other interest beyond immediate self-interest."[8]

In the specific case of translation teams, where face-to-face interaction is rare, project managers should be extra cautious with how they respond to conflict and make sure that all parties involved have had the opportunity to voice their concerns.

Communication Management

One of the most underrated, even neglected, aspects of project management is communication management. There can be several reasons for this shortfall, including:

The key to success lies in finding the team's identity and communicating it to the members.

listed in order of frequency are: schedules, project priorities, resources, technical opinion, administrative procedures, cost, and personality.[7]

If conflict is here to stay, responses to it must be constructive. People address conflict in different ways, including:

Withdrawal or avoidance: The issue is basically ignored, or more positively, left until such a time as cooler minds can prevail. This is considered a "lose-lose" situation because no results are achieved and the discussion is essentially postponed.

Forcing: One party pushes for his or her own view at the expense of

Confronting: The parties move right along to solve the problem. This method is considered the preferred approach in project management, and should not be confused with being confrontational. In other words, by facing the problem head-on, all the parties are open to finding a solution—they examine the issue with open minds and really strive for the best outcome. Notice that being confrontational is a completely different approach that involves a belligerent or aggressive attitude.

All of these approaches to conflict resolution employ some form of negotiation as the primary method of communication. In the negotiation process,

- Underestimating the importance and impact of communication management;
- Ignorance of the reality that communication must be *managed*;
- Underestimating the amount of effort this duty entails;
- Failing to address the issue of communication because of the press of "real" project management work, such as crunching budgets and schedules, preparing reports, and attending meetings;
- Failing to allocate needed resources, bandwidth, scheduling;
- Assuming that everyone is already in agreement; and
- Reluctance to impose on people's time.

As a result, much needless pain can be experienced by project managers and their teams.

What can be done to improve this picture? First, recognize that communication is the main pillar of any project—it does not just happen. Communication is real work that must be planned, organized, consistently executed, and managed. It takes con-

siderable effort to communicate the requisite volume of information without overloading the recipients. It can also take a disproportionate amount of communication effort to drive a single issue to closure. Failure to plan carefully and to execute project communication consistently guarantees that some vital pieces of information will fall through the cracks.

It is clear, then, that achieving the correct balance requires considerable effort on the part of the project manager, much of which lies in information processing. Such processing is not unlike the source text crunching performed by translators to produce the target language output. There is no mistake about it—this is hard work! It takes a lot of time and energy to process reams of information, decide what should be communicated and to whom, what should definitely not be communicated, and what bears repeating, as well as the mode of communication to be used (e.g., a private conference room, an Instant Message chat line) and the frequency of such communication.

Secondly, one should never assume that everyone is on the same page. This is especially true in today's global virtual team environment. The communication picture is complicated by such factors as different cultural assumptions, different job needs and expectations, as well as time zone differences, not to mention the pace of the project. The problem of informa-

tion overload is well known! Basically, the project manager cannot afford to take anything for granted.

The above points to the need for a communication plan. This plan must be discussed during the project's initial planning stages and then again when the project team has been assembled. Promulgating the communication plan in this way sets expectations as to what information should be expected, its channels, and defines who will communicate with whom, as well as what, when, and how. The plan should also specify that all team members have the necessary access to the mode of communication to be used, as well as to any archived materials.

The project manager must not only create the communication plan and present it to the team, but must also ensure that team members comply with the details of the plan. The project manager also needs to process the incoming information, such as regular status reports, and make sure that it is duly stored and disseminated through the most consistent, efficient, and timely means possible. This is in the project manager's own self-interest in order to maintain proper workload management. For instance, should the project manager allow a variety of status reporting formats, which will only complicate the job of reprocessing information for dissemination? Why not promote agreement on a common reporting format along with meaningful deadlines that would simplify the task of summarizing information in subsequent communications? For example, does it make sense to cut and paste the same information into yet a different format? Such considerations must be addressed in the communication plan.

Expectation Management

Even less appreciated than communication management is expectation management. As with conflict, differing expectations within any project team are normal and inevitable. Stakeholders invariably come to the table with differing needs, priorities, and backgrounds. For instance, the customer might not understand that their software product cannot be simply "translated" without first being internationalized.

The unpalatable truth is that not everyone will get everything they want, when they want it. If the customer's software must first undergo costly internationalization or reengineering to accommodate "translation," then it is unlikely that the project's initial schedule or budget will remain unchanged.

Any differences of opinion regarding what is expected must first be identified in order to set expectations. Such differences also need to be communicated during early project planning. But the job does not stop there. As with risk and communication, team expectations must then be *managed* throughout the entire project. Does the customer understand the level of support they will have to commit to the internationalization/localization effort, for example, to provide timely responses to transla- ➡

The team must develop a sense of community to bring it closer together and to fuel the project.

tors' queries? Are the product development teams and other subject matter experts in agreement with these expectations?

As with communication in general, nothing can be taken for granted. This means that the project manager is much more than a planner and executer of the project: he or she must also wear the hats of coach, public relations specialist, and diplomat!

Obviously, then, this aspect of the project manager's role is a very proactive one. It is much more difficult to adjust expectations after the project is underway when everyone is already laboring under the illusion that their own needs are paramount to everyone else's. Unless clearly communicated otherwise, most stakeholders will simply assume that their needs are understood and that they will be met in full. Late-breaking redirection of expectations is usually met with resistance, and can actually undermine stakeholder confidence in project management. ("Why are you telling me this only now?") This, in turn, means that the project manager must also be assertive. One must reaffirm that not everyone will get everything they want, not even the customer.

Donning the diplomat's hat, the project manager will have to bring tact and negotiating finesse to bear in order to achieve the best possible compromise and to keep everyone on board. Since our expectations tend to color our perception of reality, it is critically important that they be *set* and *managed* for the project from the very outset.

Lessons Learned

In addition to the product deliverable itself, another valuable output of any project is to compile a list of lessons learned. At a high level, these should document:

- What went right?
- What went wrong?
- What could be improved?

The project manager could also ask: what have I personally learned from this project?

Sadly, the lessons learned exercise tends to get lost in the shuffle at the end of the project. The result is the loss of much invaluable information and experience. The reasons for this lapse commonly include the following:

- Project fatigue or general burnout;
- Tacit reluctance to reopen old wounds;
- Fear of recrimination;
- Rush to close the project;
- Dissimilarity to the next project;
- Press of overlapping projects that likely had to be neglected during the final stages of the previous project; and
- General lack of appreciation of the value of lessons learned.

Since these realities are very unlikely to ever go away, what practical steps can be implemented to capture valuable project information? One approach is to set up a draft document (entitled Lessons Learned) in a project database where stakeholders can quickly and easily "dump" feedback at any point during the project. This helps ensure that no valuable thoughts are lost along the way.

As a further step, meaningful structuring of the lessons learned

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brainstorming document will minimize the amount of effort needed to organize, edit, and formalize the document at the close of the project. Reducing the overall effort in this manner goes a long way toward ensuring that the lessons learned from that particular project will actually be captured!

The task of finalizing the lessons learned document need not be drudgery. One proven technique is for the team, at least the core team, to retreat to an offsite location away from the usual interruptions where they can brainstorm and focus on what is in the document. The above-mentioned database serves as a starting point for the discussions. A "scribe" should be appointed to track additional feedback. Also, since the nature of the globally dispersed virtual team rarely allows for full stakeholder attendance, input from absentees can be solicited in advance for consideration by the core team.

> A sense of belonging, in combination with the high professionalism of the team members, generates a sense of ownership, which is a key ingredient to any project's success.

This approach ensures that the core team does actually review and discuss the lessons learned together, which is something they may not have had an opportunity to do until this point. The task of final compilation, editing, and dissemination of the lessons learned document normally falls to the project manager. In any case, by now most of the work has already been done.

Finally, in order to ensure that it happens at all, the lessons learned phase must be planned from the outset. As part of initial project planning, it must be added to the schedule as a milestone. This type of lessons learned document should also be planned as a project deliverable. In this way, it is not dismissed as optional during the rush to close the project. Compiling a list of the lessons learned from each project and disseminating it to team members should be regarded as a valuable asset for all concerned, individually and collectively. Failure to capture a good set of lessons learned is a loss for everyone concerned.

So, once completed, it is easy to see how this document could be filed and forgotten. How can this be prevented? How can lessons learned best be applied? Opportunities for application include having the document serve as:

- A basis for a formal project closure meeting of stakeholders. This rein-forces the lessons to everyone involved while they are still relatively fresh.
- A basis for formal project kickoff meetings for future projects. Many of the lessons learned from one project can usually be applied to another.
- A measurement of success on future projects.
- A database archiving and linking method for easy reference for future project planning documents.

In addition to minimizing the pain of the next project, a list of lessons learned can go a long way to supporting the continuing education of customers, teams, and management. After all, it is hard to quibble over a well-organized set of empirical lessons gathered from a variety of stakeholders.

Closing Thoughts

Effective project management skills can improve the success of the operations in any agency. Project management involves a combination of team building, conflict resolution, communication management, risk assessment, and expectations management. In addition, a project manager needs to be able to communicate effectively and motivate team members toward the desired goal. The job also requires the ability to teach people to examine the individual factors that lead to a successful project, and to learn from past mis-takes and triumphs. We hope you will implement some of the techniques we discussed here when planning your next project.

Notes

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6. Mulcahy, Rita. *PMP® Exam Prep— A Course in a Book* (RMC Publications, Inc., 2002), 199.

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