

# Project manager

Here's how to assemble a team across several departments

## Question:

**Recently, I have been assigned as a project manager to ensure we deliver what we promised to a new high-profile client. Doing so involves cross-departmental cooperation and teamwork. While I love the responsibility, the reality is I have no authority to tell them what to do. Do you have any suggestions for negotiating outcomes?**

## Response:

First of all, congratulations on being selected to facilitate the team. You obviously have special talents and abilities, otherwise you would not have been selected to lead such a high risk project.

It sounds like your team is made up of departments, each of which have special functions such as sales, marketing, manufacturing/operations, finance and accounting. The value of this type of multi-functional team is that it promotes efficiency and facilitates direction and control over communications and tasks.

For example, each of these departments might be involved to some degree in fulfilling the deliverables.

Sales made the contact with the customer and secured an agreement to move

forward with the plan. They understand who the players are, what the expectations are and the buffer space you have for re-negotiating different stages of the deliverables.

Marketing may be responsible for scheduling and overseeing the special promotional discounts to each region the customer competes in.

Manufacturing and operations produces the products and arranges for delivery. Finance and accounting makes sure the invoices are correct reflecting the special pricing, terms, etc.

Because of all the details involved, it's easy for mistakes to happen. That's why a project manager is needed.

The difficulties involved in leading a cross-functional team typically fall in three areas:

### Conflict

It's bound to arise. Why? Because each department has specific rules and objectives they are required to meet. The scope of the customer's project may come in direct conflict with these and as a result, the project will challenge standard protocol, causing delays until these issues are worked out.

Furthermore, the reward system that is in place may not take into account the work they are required to do for this customer. As a result, they are forced to make decisions about what is most important to them, their family or the customer. And depending upon the experience and success each person has had in working in this type of team situation, they may lack the patience and understanding needed, as each person will bring a particular viewpoint to the table: their own.

### Competency

Team members do not have the authority to tell others what they need to do. Rather, they need to be persuasive and influence the decisions and actions of others. Some managers will be more effective at this than others.

When deadlines are looming and patience is thin, people will start directing rather than influencing, which is likely to cause resistance.

### Lack of experience and infrastructure

When people do not have a model or experience for how something should work, they are naturally skeptical. As a result, artificial walls or hurdles may develop, causing wasted energy to be invested in non-productive outcomes.

Each of these issues speaks to the value and need for you to oversee and facilitate each meeting with a clear agenda. Be sure to establish clear ground rules regarding how people communicate with one another. For example, one ground rule may be that no one interrupts another person when they are speaking. Or, when people get hot under the collar, you assume the role as mediator in which all communication is directed to or through you rather than with one another.

Here are 10 tips to help you negotiate and navigate your way through this project:

**1. Establish team goals.** At the onset, explore each department's desire to see this project through to success. Have them communicate out loud the value of a successful project from their perspective. If you think it is appropriate, you may even want to craft a team mission statement that defines the goal(s) of the project.

**2. Clarify everyone's role and responsibilities.** Before getting too far into the project, take a preliminary walk-through of the project, mapping out the expectations, responsibilities and deliverables of each department as best as you can up front. Be sure to identify each handoff from one department to another as specifically as

possible, and the communication needed to make sure it is clean and easily executed from a systems standpoint.

### **3. Develop standards of performance.**

Determine as a team what are acceptable standards of performance, what are not and how you will work together to ensure your standards are consistently achieved. This includes product, service and teamwork.

**4. Secure senior management support.** At every critical step, debrief with senior management to ensure they are in the loop regarding the steps the team is taking and secure their approval for moving forward. This is especially important when departmental rules and processes must be tweaked for the project to advance.

### **5. All team members must contribute.**

It's important that each team member feel that he or she has an equal voice in the process. The value of bringing together a multi-functional team is that people will see the project from different standpoints and therefore, will identify different issues and opportunities. It's important that each person feel they not only have permission, but are also required to contribute to the team's planning and implementation process.

**6. Design a process for handling conflict.** Then, use it. Minor issues can turn into major hurdles if even one or two team members feel slighted or negated. Be sure to develop a process in which all voices are heard and decisions are made by group consensus. Define what consensus means — is it 50 percent of the votes, 70 percent, 90 percent or 100 percent?

**7. Recap agreements and action steps.** Following each meeting, send an e-mail to all parties, including top management, to recap the discussion points, follow up on action steps, unresolved issues/hurdles and a tentative agenda for the next meeting. Keep a binder with each meeting's notes so you can reference past conversations and information when needed. Also, consider asking someone outside of the team to serve as a recorder to capture the key points of the discussion. This will enable you to maintain laser sharp focus and

you can be more effective in facilitating the group's discussion.

**8. Don't play favorites.** While we all have people we prefer to work with, be careful about showing favoritism. This will alienate other members of the team and will undermine your credibility as an objective facilitator/project manager.

### **9. Get to know the team individually.**

It's easier to facilitate conversation and resolve issues when you have a personal connection with the players. Take time to meet with each member of the team individually. Meet for breakfast or lunch so you both have some time to sit back and relax. Get to know them personally. What silent strengths or areas of expertise do they possess that you didn't know about? What is important to them about the outcome(s) of this project? What recommendations do they have about how to make this work? This extra effort will pay great rewards down the road.

**10. Speak clearly.** Be careful about using too many technical terms. Be mindful of the players represented and, where appropriate, interpret language so everyone in the group is on the same page. While it is our hope that group members would ask questions when they don't understand something, it's not unusual for people to just shut down. This is counter-productive.

While this seems like a long list, these skills will become second-nature to you once you use them. It sounds to me as if this project could be a turning point for you in your career. Once you demonstrate your competency as a skilled project manager and facilitator, the options for you to lead are endless. Best of luck.



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