Recognizing and Overcoming Assumption-Based Leadership

Solbourne

Recognizing and Overcoming Assumption-Based Leadership

Executive Overview

Usually when a project begins, leaders from the client and consulting companies are working together for the first time. In spite of having never worked together, they may assume that they are managing the project based on a common understanding of project terms, expectations, and operating procedures. However, when different leaders bring different management assumptions to the project and the different assumptions are not identified and re-aligned, the project runs the risk of being embroiled in conflict and delays.

Introduction

The start of a project can be an exciting time. Team members from the client and the consulting partner normally come together with enthusiasm, excitement, engagement and optimism. Mixed-in with this eager anticipation is usually a healthy dose of reality-based anxiety. A successful project can improve efficiencies and profitability for both the client and consulting partner, which is energizing. At the same time, the project will probably be in the spotlight which can be quite stressful for team members, especially for those who are assigned to their first project. Still, the team gathers and believes it can deliver real value and a successful project. Team members plunge into their work. There is a flurry of activity. Meetings are held, requirements gathered, team building events scheduled, and countless other tasks take place. Then, at some point, frustration begins to surface. At first it is subtle, seemingly inconsequential, and ignored for the sake of completing the immediate task. A few weeks later, progress toward achieving project milestones seems to have slowed or become stymied. As project leaders demand the project stay on track, team member stress is exacerbated by the pressure to deliver. Long hours are worked, team members become exhausted and resentful of each other. Meetings become opportunities to say why something is not complete instead of reporting progress or proposing solutions to problems. Team members complain that meetings are a waste of time, time they could be using to do their work. Lack of progress puts the go-live date at risk.

By the time the project goes live, people are confused, exhausted, and apprehensive about doing another project. They ask why it was so difficult. If a "Lessons Learned" analysis is conducted it may indicate that difficulty was caused by a combination of several shortcomings, including poor communication, lack of a detailed project plan, an unclear decision-making processes, underutilized escalation process, lack of leadership availability, underestimation of time commitment from key resources, lack of direction, poor planning, understaffing the project, and inexperience of the team members. The list of possible reasons could continue, but most likely one key possible source of difficulty would not appear in the list: The project was led and governed by what we call "Assumption-Based Leadership."

Recognizing, understanding and overcoming Assumption-Based Leadership is the focus of this white paper.

Assumption-Based Leadership

Dr. Dennis Baldwin, PMP, Ph.D. wrote:

> The three most important words in real estate, it is said, are location, location, location. I believe the three most important words in project management are communication, communication, communication. After 16 years of working on, managing, and handling projects – many of them 'troubled,' I have found the most common denominator, spanning the entire length of the continuum from successful to unsuccessful projects, is communication and how effective or ineffective the communication process is handled over the lifespan of a project.

> When I analyze troubled projects, I typically find weak or ineffective communication channels and the project operating in a series of communication silos. These silos allow for vertical communication within a specific team or work group but do not foster communication across the various teams or, for that matter, among the team members as a whole. The result of these communication silos is that various teams are often working either in opposition to each other in

terms of the project timeline or not working toward the same well-defined set of objectives and deliverables. (Road Map: A Publication of the PMI® Consulting SIG. September, 2007. p. 2).

Dr. Baldwin continues by emphasizing the importance of effective communication early in the project, suggesting that the topics for project messages shift to meet varying information needs of stakeholders throughout the project. We agree with Dr. Baldwin's assessment and assertion that effective communication at a project's outset is key to project success. We also believe that one of the obstacles to effective communication that is often overlooked is that client project leaders and consulting project leaders are probably working together for the first time and that it is very likely that they understand project terminology very differently. Because they are using the same terms, client and consulting project leaders may assume that they are "on the same page". The reality may be, however, that they understand the term in slightly different ways and this discrepancy in how a term is used can lead to conflict in how the project is managed.

This point can be illustrated by considering several examples from different organizations of various sizes.

- A detailed project plan for a complex implementation that would affect multiple departments was being developed. Project leaders were asked to meet and assign who would be responsible and accountable for the different tasks. Several of the leaders from the client and consulting team said this meeting would be a waste of time since they had completed similar exercises on other projects and/or for other clients. The leaders decided to complete the exercise independently and at their own convenience. The responses collected and compiled clearly indicated that the leaders had very different understanding of what a task entailed and who should be involved.
  - o Result: Leaders did not agree about what needed to be done and who needed to be involved. Those who did the work became confused about what was expected of them and their co-workers, making it difficult to progress effectively toward achieving project milestones.

- A company with a matrix management structure was implementing an application that would be owned by two Directors. Project team members were told to contact one Director if the project would affect one group of people; the other Director was to be consulted if a different group was affected. Team members followed this advice. As the project progressed, it became clear that the Directors did not have the same understanding as to when they were to be involved but assumed they did.
  - o Result: Team members worked on their tasks according to the direction they had been given by one Director. Oftentimes, after the team member put considerable time into moving in a particular direction, the other Director would realize the direction would compromise his area and require a new direction be taken. This caused significant re-work and compromised the project timeline, potentially delaying the go-live date. Perhaps more importantly, the affected team members became frustrated and de-motivated, wondering why they should start to work when there was a high probability that their work would have to be redone once the other Director discovered what was happening. This "Why bother?" attitude infected the rest of the team making it increasingly difficult to meet deliverable deadlines.

- A public sector agency engaged a consulting partner to implement several Oracle applications. Guidelines mandated that the prime consulting partner engage other consulting companies to provide resources for the project. The prime consulting partner complied and brought together several consultants who had never collaborated prior to this project. The consultants started their project work without having been thoroughly oriented on roles, responsibilities and expectations and assumed their experience and knowledge related to their role were sufficient.
  - o Result: Consultants spent considerable time working on tasks that were another consultant's responsibility. This caused duplicate work, wasted time, and in some cases confusion for the client because different messages were being communicated to the client.

- Client and consulting project leaders agreed that a critical success factor for the rapid implementation they wanted to do would require leadership support and commitment, especially from the client. As the project progressed, both the client and consulting partner began saying

the project was falling behind because neither side was receiving the support and commitment the other side promised. Both sides began the project assuming that support and commitment would be demonstrated according to their own understanding.

- o   Result: Both parties stated that the other side was not truly committed to the project and did not support it. Trust between the parties became so eroded and blaming so prevalent that the project was halted indefinitely.

While these examples come from different organizations of varying sizes and industries, the common denominator is that each project started with leaders assuming they were "on the same page." The project team comprised of individuals who had:

- a.   different management styles
- b.   different areas of consulting expertise
- c.   different cultural backgrounds
- d.   different levels of institutional knowledge
- e.   different responsibilities within the organization
- f.   different employers
- g.   different supervisors

In spite of these differences, project leaders assumed that everyone was starting the project with the same understanding. While most of these projects went live, the cost to the organization was immense. Deadlines had to be extended, team members resigned out of frustration and had to be replaced, change orders were required, and extremely long work hours caused burnout for many of the team members.

Recognizing Assumption-Based Leadership

This discussion proposes that Dr. Baldwin's assertion that effective communication is essential for averting trouble on a project begins with project leaders understanding each other's assumptions about project management behavior. There are a number of tools that can be used to surface assumptions that underlie project decision-making. Four readily available options include:

- Interviews and Surveys
- Observation and Listening
- Incentives and Expectations
- Analysis of Resource Allocation

Each option is presented in greater detail.

Interviews and Surveys
Asking project leaders the same questions and comparing their answers is an effective way to identify assumptions that are opposed to each other. Interviews and surveys work best for surfacing potential differences related to defining terms. At the project outset, terms that are important include "support," "commitment," "alignment," "responsibility," "accountability," "expectation," "dedication," "communication," and "effective decision-making" among others.

When looking for differences in assumptions, it is important that a project leader is not asked simply to define the terms. The questions need to be framed such that the leader describes the behavior that demonstrates the word. For example, rather than asking "What is support?" ask "What do you need to see from other leaders to be confident they support the project?" Rather than asking "What is effective decision-making?" ask "What are the steps that need to be taken if decision-making is to be effective?"

Shifting the focus from definition to behavior is important because most people will agree on the definition, but there may be differences in how they act on the term. This may be due to the different work conditions from which project leaders come. In a non-project work environment a leader may assume that support means telling someone to do something whereas in a project environment that leader may not only need to tell

someone to do something but may also need to reassign that person's regular duties to other members of the department.

When project terms are described in terms of behavior, team members are more likely to see where expectations are not aligned or consistent with each other. Bringing project leaders together to discuss these descriptions allows them to see potential areas for disruption and address them before they become a problem.

Observation and Listening

Simply by observing various daily activities and listening to what team members are saying, it is possible to identify whether a team is being led by unaligned assumptions.

One parameter (or measurement) to observe is the number of hours that people are working. A project manager may assume a client resource has been dedicated to the project to fill a full-time project role. But, as the project progresses, it becomes obvious that the team member is working extraordinary hours on a consistent basis. In that case, it is possible that while the project manager assumed full-time dedication, the team member's supervisor assumed part-time allocation. Unfortunately, this difference in assumptions between leaders causes significant stress for the team member who is being pressured to deliver both project work and still perform regular duties.

Listening to what team members are saying can also reveal that leaders are operating on different assumptions. Granted, there will be a certain amount of grousing and complaining on projects and team members. Still, some complaints are legitimate and may reflect that leaders are directing team member activities based on what they assume to be effective. For example, clients often say of consultants "They don't understand our business" and consultants respond by saying, "Yes, we do. We attended meetings to learn the business." In this case, consultants assume that a meeting is an effective way to learn the business while the client assumes it is not possible to learn the business in a single meeting. The discrepancy may be due to the consultant assuming that the client is aware that multiple meetings will be held but the client leader is aware that only one meeting has been held.

Incentives and Expectations

Project leaders oftentimes do not take incentives into account when delivering a project. Understanding the incentives can provide important insight into how a person spends their time.

Many times a project begins with the expectation that team members will be dedicated to the effort. Leaders from both the client and consulting organizations expect that the team member will focus on the project. However, the team member's incentives are related to delivering services associated with their regular duties and not their project tasks. The result is project leaders may be assuming the team member is motivated to do the project work first when in reality the team member is assuming that their success in the organization is dependent on how they continue to perform their regular duties, duties they will likely resume when the project comes to an end.

To set the expectation that a team member is to dedicate their time to project and make project delivery a priority, supervisors need to communicate to the department that the person will be spending significant time working on the project. In addition to making that announcement, supervisors may need to reassign some of the team member's tasks to other workers in the department. Communicating and reassigning duties emphasizes the importance of the project and reinforces that the team member is expected to focus on the project.

Once the team member (and department co-workers) is aware of the project's priority, incentives and rewards for project participation need to be aligned with the project. Project leaders need to work collaboratively with the team member's supervisor to identify project performance criteria and rewards for the extra effort the project will require. Rewards may include cash bonuses, personal time off, public acknowledgment, continuing education courses, or gift certificates, to name only a few options.

Analysis of Resource Allocation

Analyzing how resources have been allocated and assigned to the project provides another avenue for analyzing the degree to which assumptions are guiding (or misguiding) a project. The project plan and a RACI chart can be especially helpful in this regard.

A **RACI** chart is a spreadsheet that lists project team members and stakeholders along with many of the project deliverables. When project leaders complete this chart, it is possible to identify different assumptions about who is to be involved. For example, **RACI** chart responses may indicate the client expects the consultant to do everything and then simply hand over the system at go-live while the consultant expects the client to do the daily work while the consultant acts as mentor and coach. To complete the chart, the team member's or stakeholder's involvement in completing the deliverable is identified as being:

Responsible - Those who do work to achieve the task. There can be multiple resources responsible.
Accountable (also **A**pprover) - The resource ultimately answerable for the correct and thorough completion of the task. There must be exactly one **A** specified for each task.
Consulted - Those whose opinions are sought through two-way communication.
Informed - Those who are kept up to date on progress. This is primarily one-way communication.

The following example of a **RACI** chart is used by permission and can be found by accessing the following the link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RACI_diagram.)

Task Description	Sponsor	Business Owner	Business Program Mgr	Process Manager
Identify missing or incomplete policies		R	A	R
Establish Policies as necessary and ensure adoption globally		A	R	R
Completion of necessary Policies		R	A	R
Document Policies as appropriate		R	R	A
Approve Policies	A	C	I	I
Communicate Policies as required		A	I	I
Ensure Policies are compatible with standards and best practice		R	R	A
Escalate non standard or missing policies	R	R	R	A
BP Sponsor with agreement from BPB colleagues decides on exception or not	A	I	I	I

When project leaders are asked to complete this chart, the analyst may find, for example, that the client assumes the consulting partner is **A**ccountable for a task while the consulting partner assumes the client is **A**ccountable for the same task. If this discrepancy in assumptions is left unaddressed it can lead to the project stalling because both parties are waiting for the other to take action.

In addition to a **RACI** chart, another important document is the project plan. In reviewing the project plan, if more than one resource name appears on a task, it is possible that everyone whose name appears on the task is assuming that someone else is responsible for completing the task. In that case, critical project work may be unintentionally neglected. Project leaders need to identify one person per task to avoid having team members assume someone else is doing work they need to be doing.

When neither project leaders nor a project plan is available, potential conflicting project assumptions can be surfaced by preparing a **RACI** chart from existing documents. The analyst can use a team list, a list of project tasks, and a list of project roles and responsibilities to prepare a draft **RACI** chart. When the draft is completed, the analyst can circulate the chart among the project leaders for feedback and final approval. It is to be noted, however, that this approach is much more vulnerable to overlooking potentially conflicting assumptions than meeting directly with project leaders for discussion.

Overcoming Assumption-Based Leadership

Recognizing that assumptions exist is the first step to beginning effective communication and avoiding becoming a troubled project. However, recognition by itself is not enough to overcome assumptions. Once the differing assumptions are surfaced, project leaders need to come together to discuss the assumptions and come to a conclusion as to how to find the common ground. Ideally, leaders would gather in a facilitated session to review the assumptions and clarify expectations with each other. From this session a plan would result that would help project leaders monitor potential areas of disruption. These areas should require ongoing review with updates reported to the Executive Steering Committee.

This approach may prove unrealistic, however. Project leaders may resist this approach as a poor use of time. In that event, individual team members can facilitate overcoming assumptions by asking questions that help clarify roles, responsibilities, tasks, and priorities for themselves and other team members. While team members can help overcome the obstacles raised by assumption-based leadership, they are limited in what they can accomplish. Ultimately, if assumption-based leadership is to be avoided, project leaders must take the initiative to investigate whether or not it exists on a project and how it can be overcome.

Conclusion

Though project work will always be more demanding and stressful than routine work, leaders have the power to lessen its negative impacts. The fundamental issue in making this happen is leaders need to decide if they are willing to invest the time at the project's outset to investigate their assumptions.

Ultimately, project success is dependent upon team work and team work is dependent upon trust and trust is built through a commitment to communicate continuously. When team members know and trust each other, they will begin to have conversations amongst themselves that will reveal even more assumptions, and they will clarify their expectations of each other. When assumptions are replaced by trust and unclear expectations are replaced by clarity of task, project teams can be healthy and projects are more likely to succeed.