

Article

Creating a Future Focused Organization: Being in Community

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Webster's Collegiate Dictionary – *Community: a group of people living together as a smaller social unit within a larger one, and having interests, work, etc. in common. Ownership or participation in common, friendly association and fellowship.*

After many years of formal engineering training and being involved as a controls resource, project manager and professional consultant for some very complex and even “nasty” Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) and Information Technology projects, I am rather surprised that I have arrived at the conclusion that this paper offers. Way back when, I was sure that the only things we needed were a solid plan, a good basis of design and a lot of “roll up your sleeves” effort to succeed on any project. Well, in retrospect, I was almost on the mark. Obviously, the technical underpinnings of any project or other well-defined corporate efforts are essential. Yet, where the battles are really won and lost (much to my chagrin), is on the interpersonal side of the equation. I therefore offer this paper as an opportunity to share a few insights from the “trenches.”



Today, service-based organizations (of which Project Management organizations qualify), regardless of industry, are faced with consistently providing high levels of adaptive service to clients on constrained and complex projects. In order for an organization to consistently perform at such “high pitch” and “attuned levels,” the whole organization, as a highly functioning entity, must be on the same service-based page.

When we discuss service in this context, an important distinction is necessary. That is, if our goal is to provide exemplary service to external customers, we must also provide the same service to our internal customers: one another. This is where the concept of “community” enters into the picture, especially for large and complex projects. For many years, teams and teamwork has been the mantra of many corporate gurus. And, although the concept of working together towards a common goal or purpose is fundamental to an organization’s success, the idea of teamwork is not as robust and complete as creating and being in community with one another.

Creating a community or being in community is more than being team-based. Community signals a fundamental caring and investment in one another’s well being. This generally flies in the face of corporate America, where concern for one another begins and ends at the front door of the organization. Creating a community begins with the realization that either we all win, or none of us win, i.e., we are joined in community. When we arrive at this point of realization, we also arrive at the point where we are no longer willing to allow others to let themselves and us down. Integrity and service are valued above convenient excuses and self-concern.

Therefore, creating community or being in community is:

- A service-based endeavor (unconditional service)
- Connected by shared vision, context and goals

- A highly supportive structure where support (rigorous) often may not look like the type of support we are used to (non support)
- The utilization of creative conflict as a tool for involvement, integrity, and support
- Identification, confrontation and handling what's really up and then handling what's next
- Key to success in a highly time and resource constrained industry (Project Management) with complex/ demanding projects and clients

Creating community or being in community is not:

- An excuse for easing up on folks that have committed deliverables to us, or them easing up on us
- A structure for avoiding tough conversations about what really makes us efficient
- A structure for collective excuses
- An opportunity to avoid necessary and productive conflict by “holding hands” and singing Kumbaya!

The Organization as a Deliberate Community

The Attributes

Over the years while observing some very successful and some not so successful projects and other corporate efforts, I have arrived at six key attributes of a deliberate and effective community, which are described below.

Willingness to be Managed – The ability to lead is consistent with the willingness to follow. In today's business environment, we are almost always constrained by something or someone, and we are called upon to wear many hats. The willingness to assume whatever role is required is fundamental to a flexible and responsive service-based organization.

Integrity – The heart of effectiveness has been defined as the congruity between our desired self-image and our actual behavior. Integrity is also the foundation of self-esteem. This is true for organizations and individuals, as organizations are a collection of individuals and the collective “stuff” they all bring to the table. Organizationally, a shared vision is an important precursor to collective integrity and esteem. At its most basic level, integrity is keeping one's word, and when this is not possible, cleaning up the mess that was caused by not keeping your word. In a world where egoic and reactive behavior unfortunately dominate, we must be mindful to keep our integrity and in turn, our self-esteem intact. This has a serious effect on the willingness of others to trust us.

Creativity – This shows up on different planes; the artistic and the mental. In the technical fields it is interesting how these two areas seem to meld. The mental aspect of creativity is what we would call “critical thinking,” or the ability to raise one's level of abstraction to a different level in order to solve a problem that baffles conventional thinking and/or our ingrained response. This process may result in the creation of a design different from convention, or the glimpse of the solution may create the rise in abstraction. It does not matter which is first; it does matter that the community/ environment must promote and practice creativity as a normal method of problem solving.

Compassion and Rigor - I have grouped these two together because in a functional community, they are very difficult to separate. Compassion shows up in different forms depending on what is required in the immediate situation, and who is in the situation. When folks in community are concerned for each other's development, compassion can be very rigorous, i.e., not allowing each other to fail, calling each other on the usual lame excuses used to wiggle out of commitments, etc. Compassion and rigor ultimately show up as unconditional support. Members of a community usually agree (overtly) that “nothing is personal” (see conflict below) in order for compassion and rigor to take hold and become effective tools of support versus triggers of reactive emotion.

Conflict - It is important to note that individuals involved in the most productive and enlivened environments expect and actually thrive on conflict; creative conflict that is. Cooperative conflict is utilized to spur on a higher level of thought, interaction and respect, where competitive conflict seeks to appoint a winner and a loser by taking up positional thinking positions. This is akin to practicing entrenched positions and hierarchal domination modes.

Communication - It is fairly interesting to note that if we combine all of the attributes mentioned above, we would have an amazing basis for effective communication. Effective communication is probably the most important attribute for the

day-to-day effectiveness of the corporate community. Unfortunately, as most managers and project managers have discovered, real effective communication is not a natural phenomenon. It is a skill that must be consciously practiced to be forged into a positive habit.

Personal Responsibilities in a Community-Based Environment

Individuals in a successful community-based environment have the following personal responsibilities:

Involvement (total) – Individuals must be fully participative and involved in setting goals and visions for the organization and/or team, whichever it pertinent. In addition, individuals in a community-based environment must fully participate with one another. This unconditional support is sometimes very difficult and is like a muscle that must be constantly exercised to develop and remain strong.

Model Positive Behaviors – Although entirely human, and prone to the frailties of the human condition, we must all model the behaviors that reinforce the community-based process. Part of this modeling is not being reactive and lashing out when someone points out our shortcomings (support and supportability). Refer back to “nothing is personal!”

Systematically Do Away With Withholding – The toughest one of the bunch, withholding causes more angst and bad feeling than any other action/non-action. Withholding may show up in different forms:

Holding in Negative Feelings: Although we do not want to intentionally hurt one another, we must be cognizant of the divide and energy drain that is caused by not voicing and discussing our feelings.

Not Acknowledging Others' Efforts: Not acknowledging others' efforts or acknowledging others in an inauthentic/inadequate manner is another form of withholding and undermines others' self-esteem as well as our own.

Developing Shared Context (Personal and Process Insights)

In order to develop and sustain a community-based approach, the trick is to move one another to a point of Shared Context. Given the varied level of shared experiences, cultural differences and personal wants/needs, this is quite a balancing act! Yet, it is the difference between teams that consistently succeed and teams that succeed over the “long haul” of large and complex projects.

Utilized here, context is the baseline data and the foundation of our experiences of the world, and gives meaning to all that we say, do, write or hear...basically the construct of our ability to comprehend. Context forms our interpretation of the factors that we use to understand at any moment in time; and as we are always bombarded with more experience and stimuli, it is not at all fixed in place.

Personal

In order to function as professional communicators, which is really what good project managers are (ughh...what an affront to my engineering mind!), we must be aware of and constantly employ the iterative cycle of Assume, Ask, Adjust and Understand in our day-to-day communications. This cycle is the heart of developing and sustaining good personal and contextual communication levels. For those of us that are of a technical training mindset, if this is not a normal mode of operation, we had better start working on it quickly if our career goals are to move up the ladder of the Project Management organization.

I have, by direct observation, seen that when we “boil down” every major project gaff, miscue, missed expectation, broken promise, etc., we find some form of miscommunication at the heart of the matter. This, for those in the fray of the project, is sometimes hard to recognize because the issue surfaces on a deliverables level and then is associated with a problem with design, schedule, estimating, scope, etc. At that point, when context is out of alignment and reactive emotions are high, seeing it as a communications issue is like trying to get your hands around a porcupine: rather painful!

Process

Just as important as the personal touch in all of this is the role that defined processes play in developing clear and shared context (now you didn't think I could let it go simply at the personal level, did you...come on now...I am an engineer!). All kidding aside, well-defined processes do play a big role in the development of shared and aligned context. Typically, these processes are part of a defined Project Management methodology where specific critical deliverables are required at certain project phases. These deliverables and their associated diligence create a level of scope cognizance for the team that serves as the rallying point for shared context and communication.

As a Project Management consultant, it may be blasphemous to state that a well-defined Project Management methodology is not "rocket science" and we know what deliverables are required to properly define, plan, estimate, schedule and control our specific projects. If we don't, we should; that's what we are paid for. Publications like Perry's Handbook of Chemical Engineering and organizations like the AACE have detailed these methodologies and their deliverables for 20 plus years. The Project Management Institute (PMI) is also in alignment with these methodology schemas.

Today, phased and "stage-gated" methodologies abound and organizations such as the Construction Industries Institute (CII) have long championed "Front End Loading" (detailed up front planning) processes for EPC projects and the SEI Capability Maturity Model (CMM) for IT projects. A detailed discussion of these methodologies is for another day, yet the salient characteristic of them is that when utilized across the organization (business to engineering functions) folks start to talk the same language about planning, scope and managing. They begin to form consensus around the processes and deliverables necessary to achieve aligned expectations.

Over the past few years, I have witnessed the effectiveness and low angst levels of project teams that have struck the balance between the above personal and process requirements. The result is that some very large and complex projects are being well planned, accurately estimated and effectively managed to their expectations with very little upset among the provider and receiver resources.

Closing

Ultimately, it is the development of shared context: balancing the personal and process issues, that allows us to be more community focused and in turn, unites the group around a deeper consensus, thus determining its effectiveness over time.

We must also be aware that even when this balance is struck between the personal and process issues, this consensus and alignment will still revolve around two different topic areas.

Overt Topics – generally have to do with the functional work of the group (industry, trade, business type, etc.).

These topics are the easiest to agree on and participate in. The effectiveness of the communication around them is still subject to developing shared context.

Covert Topics – sometimes called the unwritten rules, are generally unspoken topics and commonly understood anxieties of the group.

The concept of community and effective communication really rub covert topics the wrong way and is typically where the group/team will have the most difficult time with internal and external client satisfaction.

The reason that these topics remain covert is that we have a shared or learned level of anxiety around them. Over time we have all developed a general unwritten-unspoken agreement which states that *I will not mention this uncomfortable thing if you do not*. This is and of itself shared context, just not very productive and certainly not conscious.

Being in community intentionally assaults our ineffective personal and group-held norms in order to open channels of rigorous and effective communication. This is not a new age concept for Project Management; one only needs to look at well managed projects throughout the years and reams of benchmark data available to identify the criticality of an elevated sense of teamwork and communication. Both lie at the foundation of developing an effective community-based environment.