


SURVIVING AND THRIVING



Catherine Smithson shares the ingredients to increase engagement and retention and ensure a healthy and sustainable project team

Here is a foolproof recipe for project burnout:

Ingredients:

- 1 team of highly skilled and motivated people
- 1 kilogram of deliverables and milestones
- 1 task-focused project manager with strong technical skills

Method: Mix all ingredients in a large bowl for 6-12 months, then bake in very hot oven until burnt to a crisp.

Projects have many of the ingredients for motivating and retaining team members: challenging work, clear goals and timeframes, and the satisfaction of seeing concrete results and benefits.

Yet all too often, projects can churn and burn team members, from the project itself to the client organisation. High levels of staff turnover, low levels of morale, and conflict not only make the project team culture toxic, they also affect the success of the project itself. When key staff members quit a project team, valuable knowledge and stakeholder relationships go out the door with them, which can cause delays and disruptions to project deliverables. So what actions can program and project managers take to ensure that their teams survive and thrive?

ENGAGED TEAM MEMBERS

There are several different definitions of employee engagement, from the Gallup Organisation, The Corporate Leadership Council and Hewitt Associates. All these definitions are based on the idea that engagement is a higher standard than job satisfaction. Organisations and their leaders have to focus on creating and keeping the right drivers for engagement through their everyday leadership behaviours, organisational culture and HR practices.

Hewitt Associates defines engagement this way: "Engagement measures the emotional and intellectual commitment that employees have for their organisation and the extent to which the organisation has successfully captured employees' hearts and minds."

Engaged employees **say**, **stay** and **strive**, according to Hewitt Associates. They speak positively about the organisation to co-workers customers, stakeholders and friends.

They have an intense desire to be a member of the organisation. And they put in extra discretionary effort and engage in work that contributes to business success.

I am not aware of any research that has been done specifically on employee engagement in projects and whether the drivers of engagement are different to organisations. My experience suggests that there are two major challenges on projects for staff engagement, sustainability and retention.

First, all the international studies tell us that effective leadership is the key driver of engagement. This means leaders at all levels—but especially at the top—need to have a deeply held belief that people are the primary driver of customer satisfaction and organisational performance. Leaders also need to walk the talk in their everyday behaviour.

The challenge for projects is having managers who can effectively perform both the task side of their role and the people side. This isn't easy, especially when program or project managers and stream leaders are recruited for, and rewarded for, their technical skills and knowledge. Although having a technical or task-based focus is seen as a core competency for project managers, it also needs to be complemented with effective leadership capabilities.

Second, the workload and pressure of projects can easily reduce engagement by causing stress, burnout and staff turnover. The focus on timeframes and milestones can mean that project managers, sponsors and key stakeholders believe that spending time on the drivers of engagement are 'nice to have', not 'must have'.

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

What can program or project managers, sponsors and steering committee members do to help their project teams survive and thrive?

Hewitt's Best Employers in Australia and New Zealand annual research study shows that organisations with high employee engagement consistently deliver on three things:

1. Recognise employees for their contribution. Most project managers equate recognition with financial reward and short-term incentives, bonuses or increases in base pay, many of which are not feasible. If you ask project team members if they'd like financial recognition, they say, "yes, please!" Yet we know that financial reward is a hygiene factor causing dissatisfaction if missing, but not necessarily motivating employees if increased. The best news about recognition is that it is free! There is no annual budget or business case required. It is literally the thought that counts. Project managers can harness the power of recognition by following three simple principles: personalise it, be specific and give it immediately after the event. Some people prefer to be recognised in private, others in public. A handwritten note, a phone call, or a simple 'thank you' can all be memorable recognition.

WHEN KEY STAFF MEMBERS LEAVE A PROJECT TEAM, VALUABLE KNOWLEDGE AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS GO OUT THE DOOR

Project managers can also encourage teams to recognise each other, and make it part of team norms. Here's a tip: devote the first five minutes of each project team meeting to recognition and ask team members to recognise each other.

Project managers can also ensure that their team's work processes are productive, being mindful of the cobblers' children syndrome where they neglect their own work processes and systems because they are so busy working for clients.

2. Create meaning for people. Hewitt Associates says this can be achieved by standing for something as an organisation and having a culture and climate where people feel they fit.

I have seen many project managers overlook opportunities to create meaning for people. Many projects are vital to the success of the organisation and some can even be a once in a lifetime opportunity to reshape the organisation. Yet the purpose of the project and the vision for change is often lost in translation. It's buried in a business case and the project team focus instead of on project plans and milestones. Or the purpose may be clear during the start-up phase, but as the project team grows, the meaning is lost.

One food manufacturer I worked with used a simple but powerful way to give a project team a sense of meaning on large IT project. We held a project orientation workshop opened by the managing director—the sponsor—who described why and how the project had started and explained the need for change, using examples



from the business that everyone could relate to. The team then did an activity that involved them exploring the business case and the expected benefits of the change. By the end of the first day, the team understood the importance of the project and were proud to be on the team.

3. Create optimism and hope about the future. Hewitt Associates says this includes hope about the future of the organisation itself, as well as the individual's future. The 'burning platform' strategy to motivate people to change is a very overused and ineffective way to drive change. Like Chicken Little claiming the sky will fall if we don't change, it becomes less believable over time. Creating hope in a better future is a more effective way to motivate change.

Project managers are understandably cautious about overselling benefits, but they often undersell the benefits of change and the learning journey for team members. Stories and examples are effective and easy to communicate hope to reach people on an emotional as well as rational level.

Projects have the potential to be a delicious mix of challenge, teamwork and personal growth. By paying attention to the people side and creating engagement, project managers can help their teams survive and thrive. ♦

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