

Team Building in Project Management Practice in the UAE Construction Industry

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Abstract. This paper gives an overview of team building in current project management practices in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) construction industry and analyzes the state of human resource management in construction projects and its impact on overall success of projects. The paper further summarizes the challenges to a strong team building in UAE and suggests possible solutions to achieve an increased efficiency and high team morale through team building in construction project management.

Keywords: Construction Industry, Effective Communication, Human Resource, Project Management, Team Building, Team Management

1. Importance of Team-Building

Team building is not just about putting together human resources and then deploying them on a project. It is the creation of a winning and collaborative spirit among team members so that they can work efficiently and in harmony with each other to achieve project goals. Team building process is probably the most neglected aspect of project management (Lewis, 1998). Many Project Managers in the UAE construction industry underestimate the importance of team building in their projects and believe that if they can control time, cost, and quality in a project, then the success of the project is guaranteed. At times, project managers neglect or mismanage the human resources allocated to their projects, and this ultimately impacts time, cost and quality constraints of their projects significantly. They fail to realize that human resource is just as important as the three constraints (time, cost and quality) for the successful delivery of a project. Indeed, it can bridge the gap that often exists between these three criteria. Successful project managers recognize the importance of people because they know that without people, no project would exist in the first place (Bubshait and Farooq, 1999). Team building is essential to successful project delivery and long-term sustainable project management.

Project management in true terms is about effective use of principles of microeconomics, i.e. effective utilization of available resources for successful completion of a project. A project team is a collection of individuals with different needs, backgrounds, and expertise. Teams are cross-functional, which is a characteristic of matrix and project management organizations (Bubshait and Farooq, 1999). The project team members are like engine parts and when they work in harmony and close coordination, better results are achieved. This is so because each team member is able to visualize the 'bigger picture' of the project's vision and resource utilization becomes more efficient and effective.

Envisioning a 'winning team' requires a clear understanding of the stages a project team goes through in a project. There are five stages in the team development life cycle: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning or mourning (Moxon et. al. as stated in Bubshait and Farooq, 1999). During the 'forming' stage when the team members are brought together, their morals are high as they have been 'chosen' for the project; their commitment level is also high but the team efficiency is moderate as they are unaware of team dynamics. During the 'storming' stage team members start evaluating other team members' views and challenge those that they don't agree to with their own views, often causing a stir in the team. This leads to a reduced motivation and lowered efficiency of the team. During the 'norming' stage, the team starts to collaborate and respect others' views despite their preconceived notions, leading to an open dialogue among the team members, resulting in an increased efficiency and increased team moral. During the 'performing'

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stage, there is an established trust and respect for each other's views, resulting in a high performance efficiency. Finally, during the 'adjourning' or 'mourning' stage when the project is near completion, there are two possibilities. The first is a high efficiency and performance of the team because of mutual bonding and harmony they've achieved during the project as a result of a good team building approach. Contrary to this, the second scenario is a reduced efficiency and low team morale because the team members don't know what's ahead for them in the future and they are sad about breaking up of the mutual bonding that was formed during the project and/or just because of a bad team building approach. This paper presents the current state of team building in the UAE, the challenges faced and possible solutions to building a strong team in this context so that a project can be completed with an increased efficiency and a high team morale.

2. Current State

Integration of project management in the UAE construction industry as a separate discipline is a fairly new development. It was introduced to UAE's construction industry in mid 1990s, and now when it has become an integral part of the construction project team, the performance of project management firm is typically not satisfactory or up to the industry standards. Clients have started to question the effectiveness of having a separate project management team. Does it really add 'value' to their projects? Is it worth spending extra money in hiring a separate project management firm for the successful delivery of their projects? Irrespective of whether clients retain project management firms in future or not, project management skills will always be required to achieve schedule, cost and quality targets of a project as envisioned by the clients. These targets can be achieved only if the project's human resources are managed effectively and team members are nurtured to form an efficient winning team.

Team building activities in UAE's construction industry are non-existent. Corporate social responsibilities lead some firms to organize a few events like annual parties, such events range from 1 to 2 per year, per company. These events are organized as company-wide initiatives and not for individual projects. Hence, team building is not on the agenda of any construction project manager and no activities are planned for the different project teams. The current model of project management teams in the UAE construction industry is based on the hierarchy of roles. The project team is split into several tiers based on the level of authority vested in different individuals. This multi-tiered arrangement leads to segregation among the team members and results in mistrust within the team. This hierarchical segregation also results in the formation of divisive 'teams within the team' leading to a low productivity and lack of synergy due to power clashes and a continuous effort to bring down the other team! In addition to this, the formation of this tug-of-war situation within the project team gives birth to conflicts with nobody to resolve these conflicts.

At the start of year 2005, the pace of construction and the quantum of construction projects skyrocketed in the UAE. During the construction boom prior to 2007, there were many projects under construction and every project had tight schedule constraints. When the recession of 2007 hit the UAE market, projects were subjected to tight budgetary constraints. Both of these market conditions made project managers focus entirely on schedule and budgetary constraints while completely neglecting human resource management. This was despite the fact that in UAE there were only a limited number of professionals with expertise to deliver these ambitious projects. Prior to 2007, project teams in the UAE were over-burdened with the workload, with none or very little efforts made for team building and this caused a low morale in teams, which ultimately led to a reduced efficiency. Many projects were delayed and later put on hold as the economy shrank. Now in the post-recession economy, when every firm is lowering its the cost of services so as to be competitive in the market, one of the first area affected is employee welfare. An uncertain future leads to low levels of team motivation and the lack of team building efforts in the UAE construction industry's project management further exacerbates the situation. During both the construction boom period prior to 2007 and later during the recession, team building has been a very neglected aspect of project management in UAE's construction industry and perhaps a reason for the widely documented low job satisfaction in the region, despite the generous salaries.

3. Challenges and Missed Opportunities

The key challenges to team building are: tight project schedule, budget constraints, different outlook or attitudes of the team members towards the project goals, improper communication, lack of leadership and the power war among the team members. Every project management plan covers the aspects of time, cost and quality but the human resource are almost always untouched in these plans/reports. It is important to measure the team's as well individual team member's efficiency and motivation levels periodically during the entire life cycle of the project so that effective team building measures can be adopted to improve performance if the results show a lowered efficiency and motivation levels.

In the UAE, team building is not a part of the work culture. UAE attracts a huge expatriate population that often has a single-minded goal of earning and saving as much money as possible. This is different than the expatriate population in most other countries. In the US for example, most people come to work, immigrate with their families and become a part of the society. In the UAE, expatriates often come without their family members, leaving even spouses, and return in a few years. This personal culture drives the work culture to become job-oriented rather than people oriented resulting in the lack of recognition and time devoted to soft-activities like team building as an important aspect of sustainable project management. Annual events like company parties and the Terry Fox Run organized by the Terry Fox Foundation in which about 15,000 – 18,000 UAE professionals participate annually (Gulf News, 2012), provide a social space for people to meet and socialize. However, these are not team building activities in the true sense because they do not have any planned goals of targeting improved communication, building trust or interdependence, eliminating stereotypes and similar which are all required for effective team-building. Being annual events, such activities do not have the regular frequency required for strong team building through socializing

Effective management of human resources is important to successful delivery of a project and 'team building' is not as simple as is often thought, especially in a 'melting pot' culture like that of the United Arab Emirates, where the team members are from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A total of 202 different nationalities exist in the UAE labour market and expatriate population makes up for 90% of UAE's labour force (Khaleej Times, 2006). The combination of the region's huge construction industry and large expatriate labour force leads to project team members facing very unique and diverse challenges summarized best by Ailabouni et al. thus "The result is that the labour market is subjected to influences from a variety of sources that are changing rapidly and drastically. The influences include different management styles, language barriers, customs, new currencies, availability of food materials, separation from families, level of supervisors, camp accommodations and so on. Such influences have direct impact on productivity rates." (Ailabouni et al.) In such a context where the potential for conflict is exaggerated because of the inherent diversity of backgrounds, views, professional preparation/ experiences and work culture, team building become even more important. The project teams in the UAE construction industry are of a diverse nature and this diversification can affect clear communication due to linguistic barriers/limitations and cultural/professional differences. On the other hand it offers an immense potential of cross-cultural learning and collaboration. If harnessed effectively team members can bring expertise from different worlds to the construction projects and keep the 'team spirit' high and collaborative by exposing other team members to the culture and knowledge of the place/region to which an individual team member belongs.

Thamhain and Nurick (1994) discuss the variables influencing a project team's performance, which are shown the figure 1. The variables are divided into four groups: people, task, leadership and organization. The 'task' variables focus on factors related to 'triple constraints' time, cost and quality, while 'people' variables focus on team building, resolution of conflicts, collaboration and effective communication. Project managers in the UAE construction industry focus on 'Task' variables because these are the variables that the clients are most concerned about. Project management firms in the region focus on 'Leadership' and 'Organization' to achieve organizational goals. In this scenario, the 'People' variables get neglected resulting in low team morale, lower level of commitment, poor communication, and low utilization of human resources. This leads to project failures, budget and schedule overrun, poor quality and reduced profits for the project management firms and ultimately to client dissatisfaction.

Overall Political, Economic and Social Organizational Environment

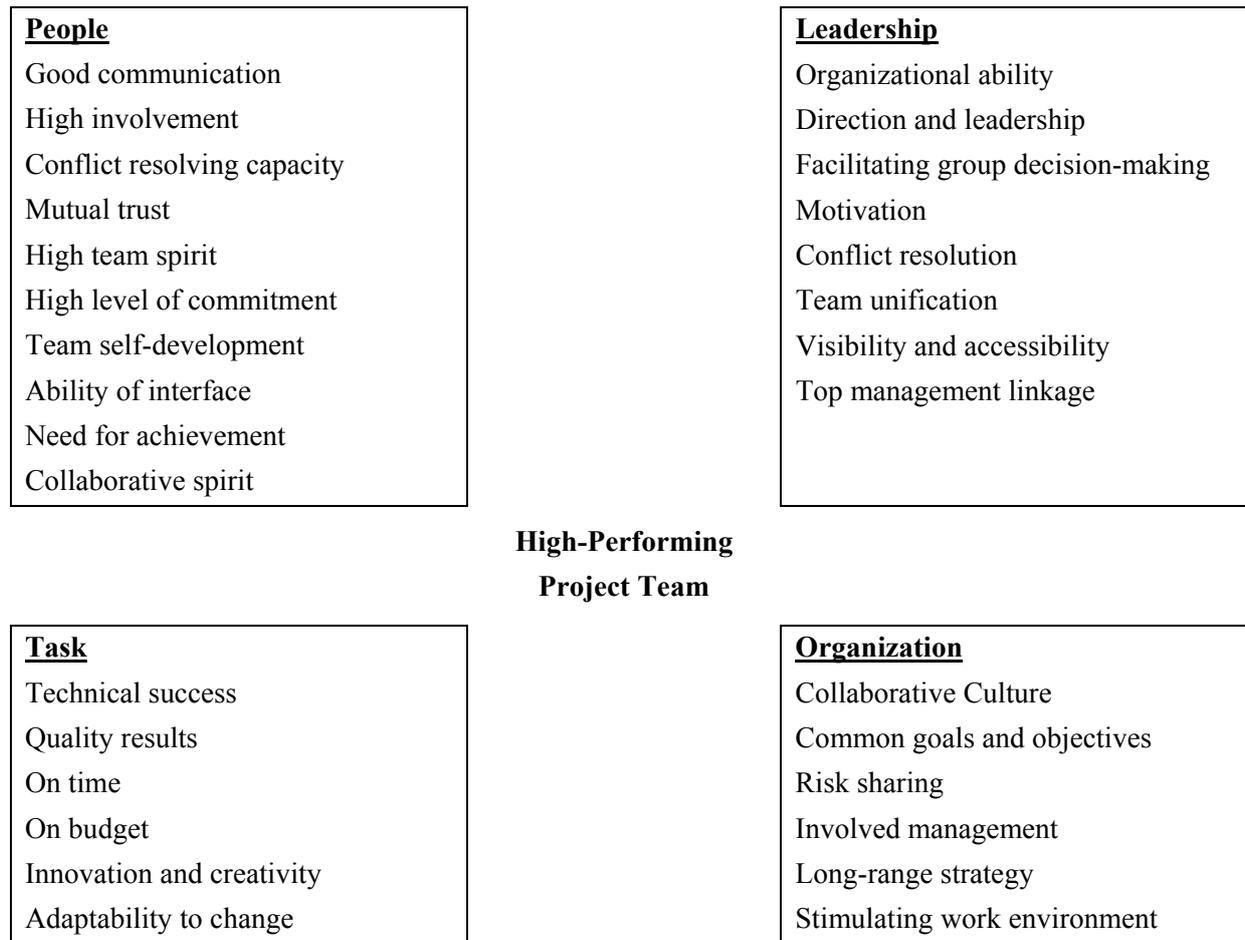


Figure 1 – Variables Influencing the Performance of Project Teams (Thamhain and Nurick, 1994)

4. Possible Solutions

Team building can be a simple task if there is a commitment to build a winning team both at organizational as well as at the project leadership level. In the UAE, team building needs to be incorporated in the project management plans and addressed at both the organizational and project level. Before designing a team building program it is important to understand the key elements of team building goals such as achievement of clear communication across the board, individual team member respect and recognition, clear identification of an individual’s roles and responsibilities, establishment of project as well as individuals’ goals at the onset of project, reward for team efforts and encouragement of loyalty to the team. The team building exercises revolve around these key elements. The results of a survey of about 250 Austrian project managers conducted by ‘Fellner Executive Training and Consulting’ together with ‘Project Management Austria’ clearly indicated that the most critical success factors are those factors dealing with relationship and social competences like team building, the working atmosphere, cooperation with the project owner and the involvement of the project clients. Time and money are not named as especially critical success factors (Fellner, 2008).

Keeping a project team together is very important; it not only allows every team member to know each other at both personal and professional level but it also allows the team to envision the project jointly by planning together. In addition to spatial arrangement of team, team-building exercises like a picnic, a movie show, a fund raising social event, even a team lunch together works well to bring the team together. These small initiatives go long way in relieving stress and also provide a platform for resolving conflicts amicably. In a place like UAE where the team demographics is diverse, many frequent cultural events can be organized,

such as celebration of ethnic festivals and sharing of cultural knowledge through other cross-cultural events to allow team members to understand each others' cultural values and practices better.

A clear communication among the project team members is vital to a project's success. Good communication does not mean only the delivery of the message; it also means the reception of the message as intended. The project manager should assure that communication is open and supportive across the board, team members use active listening techniques and listen to each other without being evaluative. It is also important to keep every team member in the loop and informed – teams should be aware of the contract summary, deliverables, and client expectations; and then the teams should be asked to evaluate the expectations and deliverable in terms of how they can support the project. This will generate the 'sense of belonging' among the team members and may uncover latent team competencies, potentials, expertise and capabilities that a project manager might not be aware of.

One of the key concerns of an employee is job security. Uncertainty about the future lowers an individual's morale and efficiency drastically. In a volatile construction market of the UAE, this is especially important. The handling of job security issues is the responsibility of the management, especially by building confidence about the future expectations of employment security and promoting progressive human resources policies and practices (Guest, 1994). Team building should begin with honest and clear communication by informing employees about how the company makes and loses money, future projects in the pipeline, market situation and strategies, and how an individual employee fits in the overall picture. It's the team leadership's responsibility to keep an individual aware of his future within the organization so that anxieties due to job uncertainty do not affect the employees' productivity and a positive environment is maintained across the organization and within the project teams.

It is important to recognize the team's efforts and performance. Individuals as well as teams should be rewarded and even small thank you notes help in boosting team spirits. Team members should be rewarded for their achievements rather than for their seniority, tenure with the company, and/or any other subjective parameter. This is an important aspect to be considered in the UAE construction industry where rank and nationality often determine remuneration, bonuses and rewards. Such an attitude is not conducive to efficient team building. The management should provide team members a chance to grow and learn new skills as well; team-building activities can focus on preparing plans so that the individual team member can achieve his/her goals while supporting company's objectives and vision. If the human resource is taken care of and managed properly, it will take care of the project with efficiency and ownership; and the business/organization will in turn be taken care of automatically.

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