

With abrupt change and a shift to more remote work, some organizations may see struggles with project flow breakdowns as employees strive to stay on top of their work. Employees now have to find a delicate balancing act between home distractions as well as managing their work priorities, without becoming stressed and overwhelmed. So, how can an organization help project leads manage effectively when teams are spread across the city, the country, or the world? Equipping the individuals in your organization that are leading project flow with the proper skillset can lead to more success (and less stress) for your company and your teams.

Using Training to Combat Common Project Pitfalls

There are any number of factors that could derail a project – lack of communication, delays, conflict, no clear goals – but a project manager that knows how to work through these roadblocks can guide the team toward the end goal. In a virtual setting, these pitfalls could be magnified, so it's important for you to train your managers on skills such as communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, decision-making, setting clear and attainable goals, accountability, time management, and communication styles.

Focusing on these skills will set them up for success as they move through the life cycle of future projects. Each phase of the life cycle utilizes some of these skills, so working on them is imperative to finishing on

Project Management Life Cycle

The life cycle of a project can get confusing, since there are a lot of moving parts and people involved. People working on the project are working on deliverables for the end client, which could be internal or

- **Initiation Phase** – This is where the job begins. There is research done on the overall project idea, talk with stakeholders, and work to define its feasibility. Important skills needed to accomplish this phase include communication and decision-making.
- **Planning Phase** – This is where the roadmap is laid out. SMART goals, budget, resources (such as which management software to use), and plans are laid out. Beneficial skills include decision-making, goal setting, and accountability.
- **Executing Phase** – This is the part of the life cycle that's diving into the actual deliverables. This is where managers can really apply those skills they have trained on, such as communication styles, conflict resolution, accountability and time management.
- **Closing Phase** – This is when the project manager ties up any loose ends. This also includes what's called a "post mortem," where everyone discusses what worked, what didn't, and plans for the future.

Training on Communication and Collaboration for Project Success

Like most scenarios in the virtual world, there must be strong communication to manage a project well. If people aren't communicating well or in a timely manner, the job will remain incomplete. Reviewing different communication styles and collaboration tactics can help everything stay on course and the team work better

Kick Off on the Right Foot

Starting with a good kick-off meeting is essential for beginning any project. It's important to have all members involved – from designers to developers to creators – so everyone knows who will be involved and what they will be working on. This will make sure everyone is on the same page from the start and allows for each member to be accountable for what they are assigned.

Meeting Essentials

These conversations help set up clear guidelines for everyone moving forward. There are important things to cover in these meetings, so the project manager should facilitate discussion on:

- **Vision, goals, and objectives** – Share with the group what the purpose of the project is and how each role helps obtain that goal.
- **Role explanations** – Make sure everyone on the team knows what their role is and how it fits into the overall strategy.
- **Communication** – Decide how you will best communicate and how often, so no items, questions, or ideas get lost in the shuffle.
- **Processes and tools** – Share project management software, if any, and determine how documents will be shared. Make sure everyone has access before the kick-off meeting, so no one is left behind.

When everyone is on the same page, they can begin collaborating.

Have Strong Collaboration

Tying into strong communication comes strong collaboration. Projects won't be smooth and efficient if people aren't carrying their weight. Throughout, the team is working as one cohesive unit toward one common, shared goal. Working together helps reach those goals more quickly while working more efficiently. When everyone is invested in working together, the result is going to be better quality work.

Training managers on accountability, conflict resolution, active listening, and communication styles will come in handy. When teams see managers following the same guidelines set for them, they are more likely work harder and smarter. When issues arise, managers will be able to help team members work it out with conflict resolution skills and by learning about different communication styles.

Lastly, managers need to have effective listening skills. Whether it is an employee, vendor, or c-suite member, listening to ideas and contributions can help boost innovation and bring new ideas to the tasks at hand. The team should be open to ideas, and all members should feel equally supported.

Building a Collaborative Team

Building a strong team that collaborates well is difficult. Everyone has their own working styles and ways of doing things. But there are tactics you can apply to boost collaboration.

- **Learn about each other.** Be sure to talk about things that aren't project related. Start meetings off with discussing holidays, sports, TV shows, etc. Adding a bit of levity can help everyone become more comfortable with one another.
- **Embrace the differences.** Some people and cultures are naturally more direct than others, while some are more comfortable being in the background. Be sure to embrace those differences and make sure everyone is heard during the meeting.
- **Recap the meetings.** There are always bound to be distractions in a virtual setting that could cause someone to lose focus. After a meeting is finished, always be sure to recap expectations, timelines, and process flow, so each party is clear on what to do next.
- **Make sure everyone is involved.** Don't take silence as disinterest! If someone seems quiet, ask them their opinion. Be sure to develop ways to get feedback from everyone – surveys, one-on-one meetings, etc.

Finding Success Through Defining a Clear Process

Just because a team has been established doesn't mean things will go smoothly. Many differing personalities can be hard to juggle. When conflicts arise (because they probably will), each person needs to know how to handle the situation and take action. That's why it's important to define clear processes from the beginning.

Creating standard processes helps eliminate confusion and can push the team past any hurdles that arise. Developing strong communication and goal setting skills allow for clear guidelines to be set and communicated in a succinct and understandable way.

Training on how to enlist the help of a project management system is great. These systems allow managers to track time, assign tasks, and even manage budgets all in one spot, keeping everything in one place and

Process Checklist

Included in that clear process should be a checklist of things to cover. Here are some guidelines on what should be communicated at the beginning:

- Best way to communicate as a team
- Cadence of meetings, with point person to send agenda items
- When (roughly) people will be available for ease of communication
- How tasks will be handed off from person to person
- What online tools to use, if any
- Deadlines for each stage

Check out these other resources to help you develop project management skills even when teams are virtual:

