

No two team members are created alike, and that isn't always a bad thing.

a little bit of everything

TO GET THE MOST OUT OF A TEAM, you need to know what makes each person tick. But sometimes it takes a little digging to figure out who has which skills, work style, personality traits and quirks.

And the results just might surprise you.

"You really need to give a lot of thought to the roles and responsibilities matrix from the outset and have the team contribute to the process," says Katherine Ericsson, PMP, director of the project management office at Southern Wine and Spirits of America, Miramar, Florida, USA. "It's amazing the hidden skills you can discover if you do it right."

BY TOM SULLIVAN -- ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE WUNDERLICH



TIP Team-building doesn't have to be a regimented event.

"If you get out of your seat regularly and have informal chats with team members, it sends the message that you are interested in their welfare and that you are approachable. It also tells them they can do the same."

—Katherine Ericsson, PMP, Southern Wine and Spirits of America, Miramar, Florida, USA

Although it can certainly be tempting to go with their instincts, project leaders should make an effort to get beyond surface impressions.

"We all categorize people in terms of gender, nationality, ethnic groups and so on, even if we pretend that we don't," says Laura M. Graves, associate professor of management at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA.

"It's important to recognize the power of stereotypes and be careful that our expectations don't determine the roles we assign people to," she says. "Otherwise it's very easy to underutilize talent."

At the same time, project managers should be aware of how cultural differences affect team behaviors.

"When someone repeatedly fails to complete a task, you need to consider whether there is a cultural reason behind it," says Peter Unsworth, senior project manager at the cosmetics company Oriflame, Stockholm, Sweden. "It can be that they come from a country where you're always expected to say 'yes' or where you do your utmost not to disappoint or challenge an authority figure."

THE MOB MENTALITY

Sometimes group dynamics can take an ugly turn as individuals or groups seek to dominate and create homogeneity. "The unspoken message to the minority group or person will be 'integrate or go away,'" says Mark Hall, Ph.D., lecturer in operations and project management in the department of management at the University of Bristol, Bristol, England.

Introducing standardized processes can minimize the impact of factionalism, particularly on international projects, but it also reduces the possibilities of benefiting from those cultural differences, he says.

Although few projects have the budget for personality testing, it can save a lot of time and effort later on. "Rather than basing project roles and responsibilities on *ad hoc* judgments, there are plenty of psychological tests that can quickly determine team members' most appropriate positions in a team," Dr. Hall says.

Meredith Belbin, Ph.D., developed a Self-Perception Inventory, for example, that categorizes team members in terms of predominant traits such as coordinators, implementers and shapers. An ideal team contains a mix of different types. Teams that are too homogenous can quickly become conflict zones as team members are forced to take on roles they're not suited to.

"If you had a team full of coordinators, for example, it would fail because everyone would want to delegate and no one would actually do the work," Dr. Hall explains.

Still, project leaders may have to do some convincing on the merits of mixing it up. Many team members will remain convinced that their way is the best way.

"We spend time raising awareness of how different work styles can affect the team and that team members need to be tolerant and understand the other person," says Brajesh C. Kaimal, PMP, head of project performance and learning at NeST, a software company in Trivandrum, India.

Intervening discretely to tackle flashpoints can help reduce conflicts. "When people are not involved much in a team, we change their modules to help them feel more a part of the group. When we give feedback, we encourage the more outgoing members to take on leadership roles, but we also ask them to take care not to upset introverts on their teams," Mr. Kaimal says.

"Team members need to know each other's strengths and weaknesses in order to function as a team," Mr. Unsworth says. "They can come from different

backgrounds and have different ways of communicating. When they get to know each other, they adapt to each other's work styles."

THE REAL THING

One way of getting people to work together more effectively is through team-building exercises. Say those words, though, and visions of ropes courses and other rough-and-tumble outdoor activities inevitably come to mind. Such exercises may not work for everyone, but they can be a valuable tool—even under a tight deadline, says Piotr Plewiński, PMP, Warsaw, Poland-based board member of PM Experts, a project management consultancy.

"What's a day or two out of a project that will last a year or more?" he says. "At first, people can be skeptical and say they want to get back to their 'real work' but after a while they appreciate it as time well-spent."

Not only will the team grow closer, but project leaders and team members can see how people work and which roles they're best suited for, Mr. Plewiński says.

But team-building efforts that are seen as one-off events may have little effect and may even cause skepticism.

"If you don't have a genuine team-work culture in the organization, then everything covered in team-building exercises goes by the wayside once they're over," says Jürgen Oschadleus, PMP, Sydney, Australia-based managing partner of Valense Ltd., an organizational consultancy. "This kind of approach can turn team members off."

Another big stumbling block to creating a cohesive team is project managers' tendency to micromanage. It can be a tough technique to master, but they shouldn't be afraid to let the team sort things out on their own.

"On a recent project I worked with the project manager who released a lot of control and devolved most decision-making

slacker syndrome

It's almost like a black hole. There's that certain someone who just doesn't seem to be doing much. Dropping the person from the project may be your first inclination, but take the time to investigate. It could be a sign something is wrong with the project.

"The slacker mentality does not just happen. People have their reasons for not pulling their weight. You need to sit down with them and get an understanding of what they perceive their interests in the project to be," says Jürgen Oschadleus, PMP, Valense Ltd. "It's about change management."

If the malaise spreads to a cluster of people, it's usually a sign of a major obstacle in a project, such as a general lack of buy-in. And project leaders better figure out why fast.

"It's very important to get to the root causes when a project is not moving forward," says Piotr Plewiński, PMP, PM Experts.

Team members may not understand the rationale behind the project, for example, and just view it as extra work.

There's also nothing wrong with using a little peer pressure to motivate underperformers.

"The term 'limited humiliation' is definitely too strong but what I try to do with slackers is put an emphasis on their action points in a project meeting," says Peter Unsworth at Oriflame.

"I highlight the tasks they need to complete, not just to them but to the entire group," he explains. "Then I'll chase them between meetings to make sure they are doing what they are supposed to. If all else fails, I'll move work away from them."

But taking tasks away from team members isn't always an option—and more drastic measures may be required, says Katherine Ericsson at Southern Wine and Spirits of America.

"If a slacker somehow makes it onto a project team, we pinpoint where the deficiency is and address it with their resource manager to find out if it's a temporary problem or a gap in their skill set that can be filled by another member of the team," she says. "If it turns out the person is just obnoxious and is upsetting the team, then we just remove them. And we have done that in the past."

to the team members," Mr. Oschadleus says. "As a result, they came up with solutions that were far better."

Project managers have to learn to trust their teams and give them greater responsibility, agrees Mr. Kaimal.

"Recently I had a team that no one else wanted. They were fresh out of college. So I showed them what was expected of them, allocated responsibilities and tasks, and gave them the trust and confidence to perform their work without fear. They performed brilliantly and went on to become excellent engineers," he says. "I've seen some very ordinary people achieve excellent results once the project manager started trusting them." PM