The project team: Managing for growth

By Richard Kingdon

Why form a project team? In our business, the distribution of food products, the margin between success and failure is thin. Customers are continually assessing our performance at the store shelf. Poking and prodding at our produce, comparison pricing on health and beauty aids, leaving us to go elsewhere when goods are not in stock. In short, competition is fierce.

To remain competitive in the marketplace, we must continually evolve our distribution systems. Some of us are building larger facilities, some consolidating several out-dated ones, others expanding coolers and freezers to provide better, fresher products. In building new or expanding old facilities, we are continuously organizing project teams to bring desired change about. We are contemplating and making complex changes which require equally complex project teams. While doing so it is critical that we maintain service levels to existing stores.

On top of these requirements senior management expects change faster than ever before. Equipped with fax machines, cellular phones, overnight couriers, why can't we put up better buildings faster? To do so requires empowered project teams with the right skills.

Teams enable us to assemble key people from our company, architectural and engineering firms, suppliers and consultants who, working together, can construct facilities according to management's direction, on time and within budget.

Still it is unclear why a project team is necessary; why not give the task to one key individual and allow him to use whomever he feels necessary. A well-structured team can accomplish much more than one empowered individual. An effective team is greater than the sum of its parts; key players
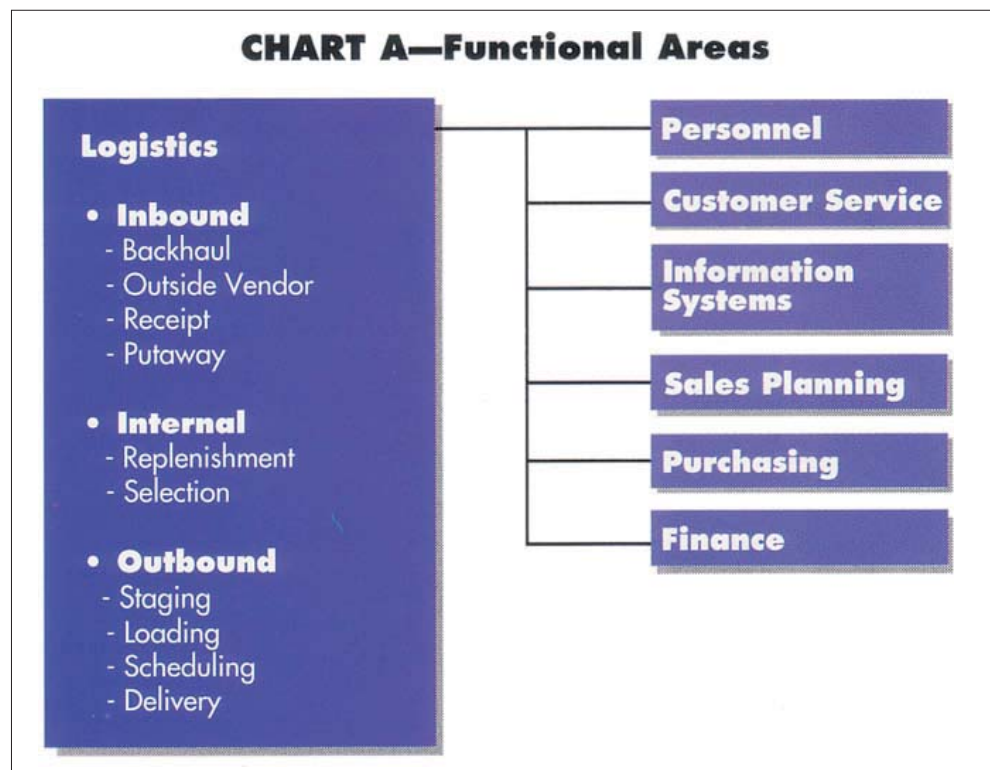
interact and build upon each other's knowledge.

Synergy is created as project team members add to each other's knowledge base. Members push one another and provide support in related areas, increasing overall performance. Different experiences, skills and viewpoints both temper and augment group decisions. Finally a project team encourages both compromises and far reaching decisions. Compromises sound weak but compromise actually means a decision between non-optimal solutions given the project objectives.

Setting project objectives

The task of determining the desired result of a project is both a project team and senior, executive responsibility. The

amount of involvement of the project team depends on many factors; the amount of empowerment given or taken by the team weighs heavily, as does the team's knowledge of strategic direction and resources versus other internal mandates.

It is imperative early on that the team set the major and underlying project objectives.

Each of these should be augmented with definition of related cost, schedule and performance (C/S/P) parameters. Once these parameters are set, the team can guide its actions and make resource decisions further down the road. Without these guidelines the team cannot recommend an alternative course of action given delays or stumbling blocks which inevitably appear.

During the project you will almost

always lose a key resource, discover tasks that have been forgotten, run into a wrong assumption, to name a few problems. The early process of outlining objectives and then resources will prove invaluable when identifying stumbling blocks, assigning a "project team within the project team", or an individual player to fix the problem and implement new solutions.

Returning to the major objective setting; make it simple, understandable, and measurable. "To build a new state-of-the-art perishables distribution center able to handle projected volume for five years at 12 percent lower costs than the present center" is an easily identified and measurable goal.

Below the major objective create the related sub-objectives, assign them to teams or individuals, and outline their timelines. To outline timelines, define cost, schedule and performance, as well as assign tasks, it is best to make a first attempt at identifying all project tasks without regard to any of these parameters. Simply list the tasks in a brainstorming environment according to related events. Then fill in the necessary parameters related to cost schedule and performance.

Who gets involved?

To choose the players and define everyone's role in the project, it is easiest to view the process as a combination of three related systems: what functional area does each player represent (Chart A); what firm does each player come from (Chart B); what role does the person play (Chart C). Once these systems are outlined, each team member's role can be defined more readily because it is easier to define their key responsibilities, lines of communication and depth of their involvement.

Chart C serves as a way of integrating the charts A and B. Each project requires a sponsor responsible for the project from a senior management perspective. This role is different from a project manager who is responsible for ensuring that the outlined tasks are completed on-time and according to overall project objectives. The next level is the coach, or process definer, who is accountable for smaller team or individual tasks,

If the responsibilities are not subdivided in this fashion, and driven downward, the risk of spending too much senior management time, as well as the feeling of a lack of employee empowerment can endanger the project.

CHART B—Companies Involved
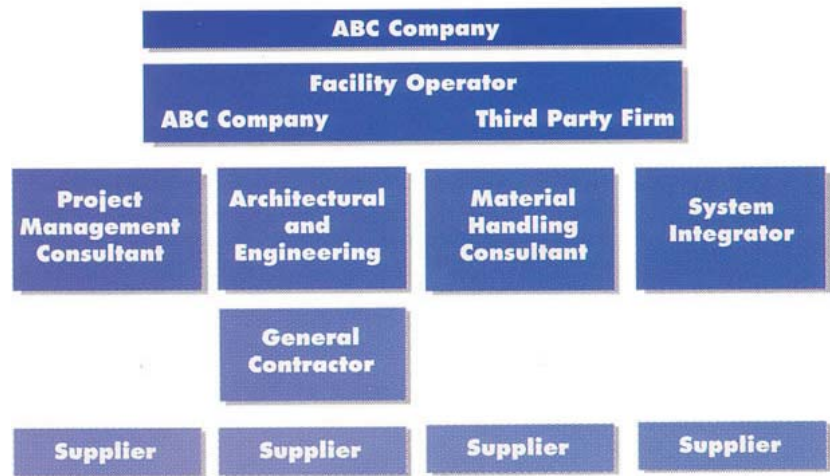
Note: There are no lines drawn between the companies above, nor are any specific players mentioned, because the players and their involvement depends on the specifics of each project.

CHART C—Project Roles
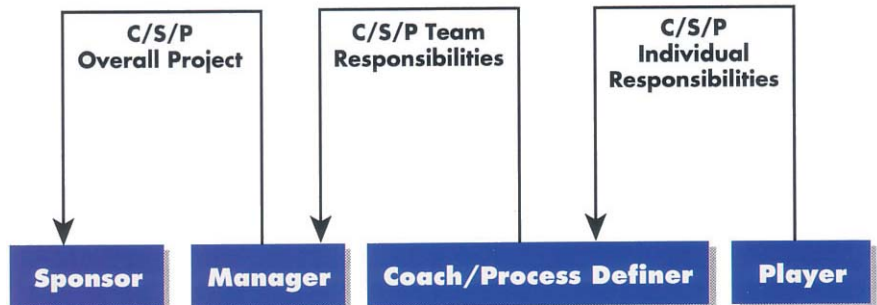
How does the project team function?

At the core of the project team's responsibility is a focus on getting the right people accomplishing the most effective tasks. Once the team outlines its objectives along with the corresponding cost, schedule and performance (C/S/P) parameters it's important that the project manager and each of the coaches:

1. Prioritize and Update Cost/Schedule/Performance
2. Manage People
3. Manage Process

To do so it is important that the project be led and managed. By leading the project we mean that the team must have a sponsor who is responsible for senior management's objective. The individual is he delivery of the objectives and communications are needed to ensure the delivery of the objectives and communications are understood. Leadership includes obtaining the best effort of team players. In addition, the project manager must ensure that the project is innovative, has the

necessary key people and maintains a positive attitude and perception. Each key player: sponsor, manager, coach and finally team members respectively, must display a descending level of leadership and an increasing level of management.

Another key component of managing the project lies in deciding who to involve in regular meetings, specific or focus meetings, telephone calls, etc., To do this, it is best if the following guidelines are followed:

Extended Project Team-All the people involved in the project should be involved in meetings encompassing overall project objectives, setting the C/S/P (cost, schedule and performance criteria). The same team should decide upon the key players and should meet several times to know who all the players are, and define and review roles.

Core Project Team-The core members should meet regularly (usually once every 1 to 2 weeks) to review progress and bring forward key decisions. The core team should consist of the project manager and coaches.

Sub-Teams/Functional Teams- Small functional teams are best for focused decision making, problem solving and in making difficult key decisions

which require careful analysis of advantages and disadvantages.

If this is done effectively the discussions can be purposeful and decisive, team communications will be streamlined, and the project will proceed quickly.

As we manage our growth and attempt to remain competitive in the marketplace, projects, and more specifically, project teams can allow us to quicken the pace an effectiveness of change.

Empowered teams, who have set their course with clear objectives, a realistic time frame, and cost targets, can be much more effective than a loosely arranged group. While forming a project team, it is critical that we involve outside companies, particularly equipment vendors early to realize the biggest gain. By recognizing the

group. While forming a project team, it is critical that we involve outside companies, particularly equipment vendors early to realize the biggest gain. By recognizing the different roles played by the sponsor, manager and coaches, we can make a conscious effort to run more effective projects. +

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