

Cross-functional Projects: Do They Produce Conflict & Not Much Else?



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Summary: Succeeding on cross-functional projects is a survival requirement these days. But these projects require that we handle authority, workloads and rewards differently. When we don't, the cross-functional effort usually follows a downward spiral of conflict and blame avoidance.

"Cross-functional projects are characterized by people from departments like IT, Operations, Sales and Engineering joining hands to selflessly produce valuable deliverables for the organization."

Yeah, right.

In the real world, cross-functional projects usually produce little of value and enough conflict to frighten a white shark. Let's look in on a cross-functional project team meeting and then go back and see what caused the mess.

We Deliver Conflict and Blame Avoidance

The project sponsor looked over the project team with a sneer then thumped a finger on the table one last time and said, "We will have World-Class Customer Service by March 30th or there will be big trouble for each of you," then stormed out of the status meeting.

The project manager gulped and said, "Okay, we have four weeks until the deadline. Let's figure out what we can slap together in that time."

"We can all rewrite our resumes," a systems analyst quipped with a smile that faded as no one laughed.

"That's been your attitude all along," a Customer Service department manager snapped back. "This project is going to kill us. You and your geek buddies will go on to some new project and leave us with a stinking mess. Your software doesn't give us even half of what we need and my people can't use it!"

"Well you can blame yourself for that," The IT analyst answered. "You've changed the requirements each week. What do you expect when you do that and then send less than a third of your people to training?"

"There's nothing wrong with our training program," the Human Resources representative piped in. "Attendance has been a little low but we're going to make the training more enjoyable this week."

"Oh, I'm glad about that," the Customer Service manager scoffed, "Maybe your trainers should have spent time learning the application instead of making things fun. Can they even use a PC?"

"It's not our fault that the PCs were late in arriving" the Purchasing representative said, "No one told us about the order until a week ago."

Each Department Gets it Own Project and PMs

These messes start several ways. One proven path to failure and conflict is for executives to subdivide strategic projects into several departmental projects, each with its own PM, and then hope that the projects can somehow be coordinated. They're trying to avoid the matrix management & resource sharing problems that come with doing cross-functional projects. Sadly, this approach never works. It routinely leads to the kind of cross functional finger-pointing we saw in the meeting above. The PMs see themselves as representatives of their functional areas and work mainly to avoid being screwed by other functional areas as the separate projects are somehow cobbled together. The team members on each department project have little interest in the project assignments, particularly if they require working with someone from across functional lines. The activity that receives the most attention is avoiding blame. Running a close second is gathering evidence of other departments' guilt in causing the overall project's failure.

The justification for using this approach comes from previous failures with cross functional projects. Or turf wars between departments may be so intense that executives are uncertain of their ability to force cooperation. So we continue to see projects subdivided, each with its own plan and project co-manager, a title which is equivalent to wearing a sign on your back that says. "I'm headed for failure." The "us versus them" mentality so divides the team that they rarely deliver anything but conflict.

Cross-functional Efforts & Promises of "Full Support"

But let's say a scary external threat or a scary senior executive frightens the functional division heads sufficiently that they agree to support a cross functional project. During the initial planning, with the scary senior executive sitting at the head of the table, the functional managers vow that they can work with you as the sole project manager. They put their arms around you and promise full support and agree to assign their best people to the effort. Have you broken the code on doing cross-functional projects? No.

Six days after that kickoff meeting, the promised resources do not show up to do their project work. When you call the functional division head (who wrapped his arms around you) he has no idea who you are and only a vague recollection of the cross-functional project. After pleading, whining and threatening a call to the scary executive, the functional manager agrees to provide the promised resources but only 2 instead of 5 because they are real busy. One of the people who comes to work on the project is a nincompoop whose absence from his unit will increase its productivity. The other team member makes it clear that she is coming to the meetings to "represent the department...not to actually do any work." The nincompoop shows up at all project team functions and is willing to work on your project full time.

As we see getting agreement to use a cross-functional structure for this strategic project does not ensure success. We need to add additional ingredients to make it work. More specifically, create a situation where people can work effectively for two or more bosses.

But that violates a key principal of management unity of command you may say!

Right and that principal is violated every day in professional firms and many non-bureaucratic organizations. The best example of how matrix management works is the typical grade school kid who "works for" the math teacher, the band leader, science teacher and the softball coach not to mention a parent or two who manages the overall workload. Matrix management works because each of those superior-subordinate relationships follows three rules. Rule #1- Each of these "bosses" has the kid for a specified time period (English class is from 9-10:05 and softball starts at 4:00 ends at 5:15). Rule #2 - Each boss also has their own performance rewards (getting an "A" in English, playing shortstop on the softball team). Rule #3 - The parents manage each kids overall workload.

These three rules make matrix management work in professional firms and non-bureaucratic organizations where employees work for multiple bosses. The role of "parent" is played by the functional manager of the employee's "home" department who makes sure the overall work load is reasonable.

How do we make matrix management work on temporary endeavors like projects? We apply the same three rules. The project manager "owns" a specified hunk of the team member's time (mornings, 5 days a week, for the first 4 weeks in July). Second, the PM rewards performance on project work (determines 25% of the annual performance review). Further, when we start doing cross-functional projects on a regular basis, we set up a project management office (PMO) to be the "parent" of all these people working on multiple projects plus having a real job. The PMO makes sure the total workload is reasonable and that the employees work on projects in the correct priority order as set by management.

Come to the Status Meeting and Rip Someone's head off

So we have the cross-functional structure and the organization is following the three rules that allow matrix management to work on our project. Are all the problems behind us? Not quite.

Most project team members bring to the project team a history of working with other departments in the organization. Turf wars between functional units are normal phenomena in organizations. Marketing and Operations loathe each other, users hate IT and so on. When your team members arrive with a history that includes conflict, you'll have that component in your project team culture. Project managers need to be more assertive with cross-functional teams in setting the team culture because they slide into blame avoidance and conflict more easily than a team where everyone has the same boss.

Even with a lot of nasty baggage from previous projects, a project manager who acts to set the proper achievement-based culture can stifle conflict among team members. Techniques to apply include:

- ❑ Crystal clear individual assignments with objective measures of success to make accountabilities clear before work starts and make blame shifting more difficult

- ❑ Team participation in developing the WBS and cost/duration estimates to give every some ownership of the plan
- ❑ Weekly reporting of results with public posting of actual vs. baseline
- ❑ Weekly “estimates to complete” to allow early problem ID.

Summary & Action

If problems are plaguing your cross functional projects, consider our [individual web training](#) and [organizational programs](#) to make your cross functional projects more effective.