

Cultural Diversity – Building Teams for Success

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We have all heard the analogies of “There’s no I in team” or “We’re only as strong as our weakest link” and though each of these presents a good foundation on which to write about team building, this is not one of those articles. This is not an attempt to prove a one size fits all approach or to demonstrate a structured methodology for team building. The purpose of this article is to show how, by picking a group of people with different degrees of technical backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, etc., a successful implementation team can be built. It will discuss how leveraging beginner, intermediate and experienced resources can not only help accomplish the project goals, but also plays an integral part in establishing a successful operations team.

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We all understand that processes break, tools fail and technology rarely has a 100% uptime. For those of us who have lived through the pre-framework era or remember when the actual management of the computer systems was accomplished without automation or monitoring tools, it’s not too far of a stretch for us to consider the importance of having the right people performing the right job. In fact, most of our management time “in the day” was spent finding and then retaining the right people.

Has the maturity of technology really changed that for us? Has process and tools devalued the importance of people? The answer is a most definite “No”. The power of the human spirit is still an integral part of what drives success within IT.

To demonstrate, I will share a personal achievement to show the strength of people within a successful IT organization.

The Achievement

As an aspiring IT Manager, I, with other critical team members, was given an opportunity to build an IT Desktop Implementation and Support Team from ground level. The company I worked for was in growth mode and had just absorbed another line of business that more than doubled its current logistical and technological footprint. To paint the entire picture of what was required as part of this project would take an article all to itself, so to simplify the scenario, I’ll give you the following highlights:

- The existing logistical footprint was 12 sites within a 20-mile area expanding to 27 sites within a 100-mile area.
- All of the new sites had to have a complete infrastructure installed from wire to desktop.
- The current technological footprint was a mixture of an AS/400 and Client/Server architecture; the new footprint would introduce a UNIX solution into the mix, double the AS/400 footprint and more than triple the Client/Server environment.
- The current data center would not support the expansion of equipment, so a different facility had to be identified and built out. The brand new solutions would be constructed in the new facility and the existing architectures had to be relocated to the new data center prior to the cut over date.
- There was no current Help Desk Group nor toolset used for tracking incidents and service requests (the Operations

Group tracked calls within a log).

- The existing Desktop Support Team consisted of two people.
- The Project Management Team consisted of one person.
- And the topper... we had only 3 months to accomplish our project goals.

Now we already established this was a successful project, but it wasn't easy: the hours were long and arduous, weekends became virtually non-existent and existing customers still had day-to-day requirements. Yet, by choosing a diverse team with a common desire to be successful we achieved our project goals.

So, how did we choose our team?

Choosing the Team

Firstly, and immediately, we looked internally. It's amazing how much potential you can discover through a major change such as this. We found we had existing resources that were waiting for their opportunity to rise to the occasion and "show their stuff". We had week-end and third shift operators that maintained their current roles plus picked up the first shift M-F support. This helped free up existing resources, myself included, to focus on the project. It should be noted that later in the project life cycle these same personnel became integral team leaders in both the successful completion of project tasks and valued members of the new Desktop Support Team.

So how do you maintain that level of awesomeness with contracting and employing new personnel?

We did go through the necessary steps of the interview process for technical competence and abilities, but with that we focused on two specific areas that ultimately championed our success: motivation and character.

Motivation

Seeing our co-workers overcome the barriers of being equated to "third-shift" or "weekend" IT resources (for those of you who were there, you know what I am talking about) and not only gain personal success but really set a stage for our own success, caused us to ask – what motivated them?

We noticed there were two different recurring personal success motivators:

1. Resources that were driven by promotion - looking for a way to get to the next level within the IT realm.
2. Resources who were driven by a new start, i.e. fresh out of school, young/old - looking for an opportunity to start a new career.

People who are truly motivated to be successful have an innate ability to achieve the unachievable. Now many interviewees can sell themselves on being motivated, so we had to come up with a way to check that innate ability. We did so through a test of character.

Character

To begin with, we established a desire to develop a team that was culturally diverse in background and experience. We didn't want to clone our existing resources, as great as they were, but instead choose members that added to the success equation. So we focused on the common character traits that we felt were the most important to fit into and expand the team, and we tested them on those traits.

For us, the list was rather simple:

- Show up and be on time – still my number one character trait in choosing team members. In the midst of this mountainous project, we needed people we could rely on. This was easily tested by showing up and being on time.
- Willingness to work – as mentioned earlier, the existing resources rolled up their sleeves and got the job done. This one was kind of fun, I must admit. We had training rooms that had to be setup as part of the cutover, so a contractor's first assignment was to sweep, clean and setup a training room. This one test alone eliminated many who were truly not motivated.
- Service with a smile – our customers demanded service that was not only technically competent but required grace under pressure. We knew who our tough customers were and would send the resources through them to see if they could withstand the onslaught.

- Creativity – throughout the course of the project, the resources who not only passed the previous tests, but also helped us in building and enhancing installation procedures, configuration scripts, trouble shooting techniques, documentation, inventory control and yes, sweeping and cleaning tips were the ones who rose to the top.

Summary

Building a successful IT team isn't easy, but it can be fun. By embracing a mindset that is open to a diverse cultural background, choosing people who are truly motivated and deciding what character traits are most important to you and your team one can create a successful environment that is achieved through the strength of people.

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