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Analytic Assessment of Team Cohesive Influence on Project-based Performance

David Akpan, PhD

ABSTRACT

Cohesion is major attraction to several performing team as individuals show level of satisfaction in sharing and supporting each other to achieve the set project goal. The absence of cohesion in a team will certainly affect performance and may result in unnecessary stress, anchor, tension, divided minds and self-commendation. It is often perceived that when people come together for a common goal, it is likened to a team and is expected to perform. This misconstrued the idea that a team is effective when there is no cohesion or internal mechanism that supports and complement each other to achieve set goal. This assessment is imperative to research into how team cohesion can speed up performance in a given project, and as well identify factors that make or mar team cohesion. This was a quantitative assessment with the use of a structured questionnaire to elicit information from study participants. Study participants were selected through a purposive sampling method. The instrument was administered through an interview process where the study participants were allowed to response to the statements in the questionnaire. Findings from the assessment reveals varied strength and gaps in team cohesion starting with formation, feedback, conflict management and participation.

Keywords: conflict management, team forming phase, team norming phase, team participation, team performing phase, performing team, project cycle, team storming phase, team cohesion and team development.

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ABSTRACT

Cohesion is major attraction to several performing team as individuals show level of satisfaction in sharing and supporting each other to achieve the set project goal. The absence of cohesion in a team will certainly affect performance and may result in unnecessary stress, anchor, tension, divided minds and self-commendation. It is often perceived that when people come together for a common goal, it is likened to a team and is expected to perform. This misconstrued the idea that a team is effective when there is no cohesion or internal mechanism that supports and complement each other to achieve set goal. This assessment is imperative to research into how team cohesion can speed up performance in a given project, and as well identify factors that make or mar team cohesion. This was a quantitative assessment with the use of a structured questionnaire to elicit information from study participants. Study participants were selected through a purposive sampling method. The instrument was administered through an interview process where the study participants were allowed to response to the statements in the questionnaire. Findings from the assessment reveals varied strength and gaps in team cohesion starting with formation, feedback, conflict management and participation. Areas identified as partially improved were linked to team feeling self-stimulated to seek solutions for work-related problems, having access to work-related information as when required and creating opportunities for conscious exchange of ideas even in busy schedules. Conclusively, it is important for project managers and leaders to

recognize that absence of cohesion in a team will certainly affect performance of the team and create unnecessary stress, anchor, tension, divided minds and self-commendation and also directly affects project outcome.

Keywords: conflict management, team forming phase, team norming phase, team participation, team performing phase, performing team, project cycle, team storming phase, team cohesion and team development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although projects are initiatives created to meet needs, there require people to implement these initiatives. In the same vain, implementing these initiatives cannot be achieved by one individual or the project lead. It would require the support of other expertise and skill sets which will be shared among other persons. This is why individuals are recruited to be part of a project team to assist the project lead achieve best of results within stipulated time and scope. Putting this team together to work in an efficient, self-motivated and result-focused environment is the task every project manager will need to accomplishment (Alvarez et al, 2013).

Most times, project managers are overwhelmed with coercing team, or changing 'mindset' of team members to focus more on the project results, than the persons producing the results. This creates a significant gap in creating a balance between motivating the team to work together, collectively towards meeting up the project results. It is important to mention that project teams are integral part of any project success, and its symbiosis relationship is eminent and should

be well managed (Likert, 1975). Project managers understanding the important of team to their project will create a lot of difference in the way the project is being implemented.

Some of challenges and experiences in projects is that people tend to work for the project manager, rather than work to be satisfied of their contributions to the project. This creates a scenario of teams showing their individual ability to perform, and setting up a 'blame game' mantra when the project fails. Creating and strengthening project team is in itself a critical aspect of project management. Project management standards recognizes that teams are part of the project structures, activities and tasks designed, implemented and managed in a coordinated manner. There is a significant relationship between a high performing team and high performing project (Druskat and Wolff, 2001). This further justifies that work done by team not individuals come with a lot of merit and gains to the project.

Relatively, projects benefit more from the diversity of knowledge, ideas and skills from team members and a collection of all experience of every team member gives the project a better outcome. However, identifying, harnessing and managing this diversity in the team could be challenging to several project managers and in turn affects the outcome of the project. This paper will conduct an analysis of team cohesion in a health project in Nigeria (4Children) to ascertain the likelihood of the project success. The study will focus on how the project has been able to strengthen its team cohesion towards achieving significant project results. The outcome of the study will benefit project leadership of 4Children as well as other project managers in ensuring that their team receives equal attention, just like the project results.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

A performing team is more than a group of people coming together to achieve a common goal. It is often perceived that when people come together

for a common goal, it is likened to a team and is expected to perform. This misconstrued the idea that a team is effective when there is no cohesion or internal mechanism that supports and complement each other to achieve set goal. Several researches have focus on how working as a team can lead to a performing project. It is imperative to research into how team cohesion can speed up performance in a given project, and as well identify factors that make or mar team cohesion. The objectives of this study therefore intend to investigate how team cohesion can strengthen project performance; and identify factors that can distort team cohesion and project performance.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

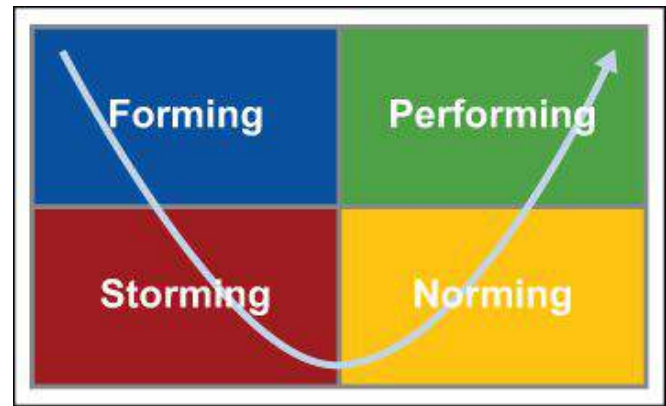
Across all the phases of project management requires involvement of persons who have the requisite knowledge, expertise and skills to deliver (Mendez, 2003; Kloppenborg and Petrick, 1999). For example, the project design phase is executed by persons who have deep understanding of the project area and can conceptualize the thoughts of the issue into an initiative to address the emerging gap. The next phase will require persons who can interpret the initiative and get it started within stipulated time and scope. It is at this phase that the project manager is expected to put up a team that possesses the ability to work together and come with the requisite skills in the project area.

The next phases of the project cycle – implementation and closeout is when the project manager shows the ability to motivate the team to achieve results, and feeling satisfied in being part of the team. This is when team cohesion is most useful and an expected skill of the project lead. Team cohesiveness is the extent to which team members stick together and remain united in the pursuit of a common goal (Katzenbach and Smith, 1994). A team is said to be in a state of cohesion when its members possess bonds linking them to one another and to the team as a whole. Building team cohesiveness is becoming more challenging to several projects and has become a significant factor affecting project success (Tuckman, 1965).

It is therefore important for project managers to understand their team and work towards strengthening the bonding within the team to ensure they are motivated to deliver on the project results.

The challenge with team cohesion starts with setting up of the team. Within the project cycle, this happens at the project startup phase. In most cases, it is expected that the project design team should build up mechanism that that allows the team to go through the various stages of team formation – forming, storming, norming and performing. The purpose of setting up a project team is to achieve a common goal. Project team members do not necessarily have the same skills or background, but their skills and experiences complement each other to fulfil the project's objective (Verma, 1997). This is why building cohesiveness among the team will help the project implementation run smoothly. A high performing team is in tandem with a high performing project.

However, it is worthy to note that every high performing team progressed from a forming stage to be a performing team. Every team within the project management structure experienced some challenges at the forming stage. This is expected as people join the team with diverse set of experience, background and skills. The challenge is getting the team to the performing stage supporting each other towards achieving the project results (Verma, 1996). Sometimes, this could mean a lot of work for the project manager while some might be unaware of the impact of lack of cohesiveness in the team on the project results. Picture 1 shows the different characteristics across the stages of team development.



Picture 1: Stages of Team Development (Source: Molnau, D. No Date)

Referring to the stages of team development, a cohesive project team is known in their ability to work together, cooperate and poise for high standards of performance. A cohesive team opts out of individual ability to team connectivity for success. A cohesive team will tend to focus more on the process leading to the result, than the person (Daft & Marcic, 2009). There is a show of respect with good motives and everyone feels relax and get committed to team decisions and strategies. A cohesive team is accountable to each other and develops a morale that brings loyalty, friendliness and effective communication (Piccoli et al, 2004). These features are requisite for every project team to success. Several projects face difficulty achieving its set results, due to lack of cohesiveness within the team. Every member of the team is striving to achieve its assigned output level result(s), without considering his/her contribution to the overall project result and how to support each other towards this mutual goal.

Verma (1997) illustrated that a team could also move from collection of persons, workgroup and a team. Project managers are also faced with the challenge of distinguishing between these categories of teams. Some projects functions with a collection of persons who are part of the project to deliver the result for the organization or project lead. Other projects operate with persons who come together to influence the way the project is implemented and are independent of each other. The last sets are project with persons who are

interdependent, connected and support each other all through the project phases for a common reason. The final sets are attributes of a cohesive team.

IV. THE STUDY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Study Conceptual Framework postulated that an effective team focuses on improving four critical areas namely roles, procedures, leadership and above all relationship. An integral part of the conceptual framework identifies leadership and relationship as key to ensuring the team succeeds and perform at maximal expectations. The first two pongs of the team model recognize that a team would need to clear its roles and work towards procedures that keep them as one, however, without a strong and credible leadership as well as relationship build on trust and respect, there is likeliness that the team may struggle.



Picture 2: Team Effectiveness Model (Source: University of Victoria)

This framework makes an attempt to establish the importance of team cohesion by identifying key areas of team building that strengthen cohesion. The selection of the concept is to demonstrate that a performing team will need more than a clear vision, values and goals but a mix of procedures, strong leadership and positive relationships. This is importance in ensuring that the team is able to manage change, its competencies, strategic focus

and diversity for a common good of all team members.

V. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH TO ANALYSIS

This was a quantitative assessment with the use of a structured questionnaire to elicit information from study participants. Study participants were selected through a purposive sampling method. Participants selected for the assessment were categorized into senior members of the project management team and the field staff who are also part of the project management team. A total of 15 persons participated in the assessment. The instrument developed for this assessment was structured to team development, feedback mechanism, participation of team members and vision development, managing conflict, team roles and structure, team member development as well as how the team builds understanding and collaboration. The instrument was adapted from the team assessment tool developed by Mind Tools.

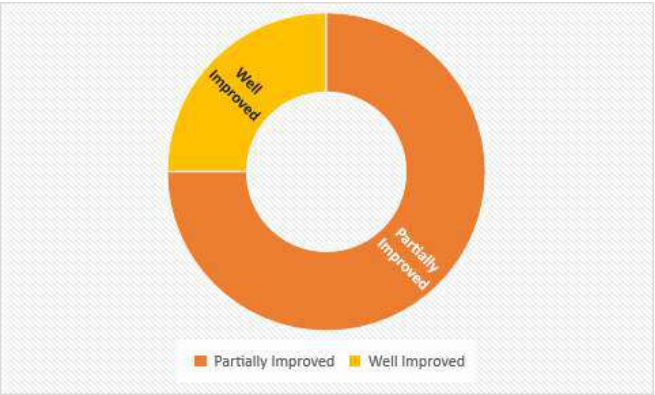
The instrument was administered through an interview process where the study participants were allowed to respond to the statements in the questionnaire. The researcher also provided initial background to the purpose of the study and each of the statements to allow for apt response. Study instrument were collected for further analysis and interpretations. The process of analysis started with coding of the instrument based on the 5-scale measurement. Data analysis was conducted using a statistical package to determine the frequency of occurrences. A frequency chart is used to interpret who many times a particular issue has been rated by all respondents. The frequency chart was later used to develop charts for interpretations.

VI. ANALYZING OF FINDINGS

The findings of the assessment are presented in two levels – showing extent of cohesion and the leadership gaps in 4Children project.

6.1 Team Development

This section examines how the team evolves and members are involved in the process of building support. The analysis checks for knowledge of the team members in the team development process as well as understanding how it can work together to accomplish assigned tasks as a team. Picture 4 reveals the level of progression in 4Children team.

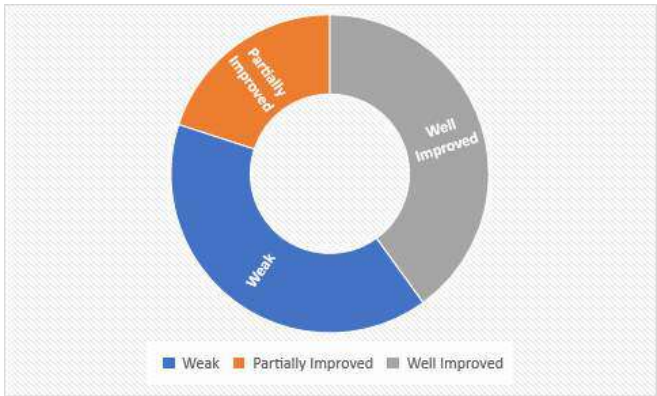


Picture 4: Analysis of cohesion in 4Children team development process (Source: Data Analysis)

Findings reveal that 67% of the team development process has partially improved, while 33% were well improved. This further reveal that no area of the team development process was weak. This clearly shows that the project was able to manage cohesion from the forming stage and is gradually working towards strengthening cohesion in partially improved areas. Areas identified as partially improved were linked to team feeling self-stimulated to seek solutions for work-related problems, having access to work-related information as when required and creating opportunities for conscious exchange of ideas even in busy schedules.

6.2 Feedback Within The Team

This section analyses how the project team adopts and uses feedback to strengthen communication, performance, motivation and support each other. The outcome also focuses on how the project management team enables feedback within the project team, working towards improving the team and the project outcome. Picture 5 provides analysis on the rating of the project team as its regards feedback.

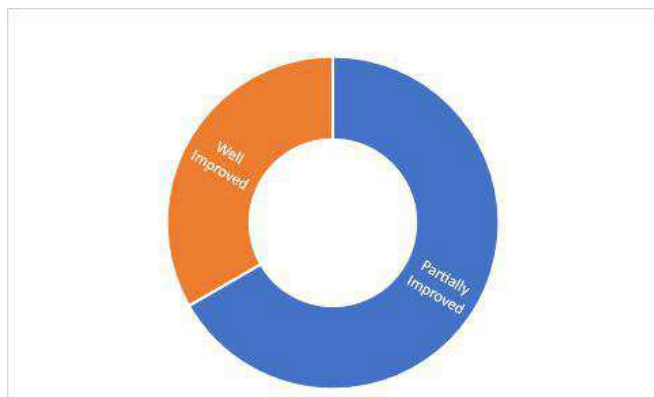


Picture 5: Analysis of 4Children feedback process as an approach to building cohesion (Source: Data Analysis)

Findings from the analysis reveal that the project feedback system is fairly improved, although with key areas to strengthen. The analysis shows that the feedback process is neither weak nor strong, with 40% level of weakness. Significant areas identified that require improvement were providing feedback on every task to build motivation for another, defining and implementing a mechanism that allows for 360° team feedback not only to line managers but across the team members as well as project managers improving in their fairness to attending or responding to feedback.

6.3 Building Cohesion In Participation

This section of analysis presents the results that depict how project team strengthens team cohesion during participation in project management activities. The analysis recognizes participation as a critical element of project management, and thus analyzes how team cohesion can influence the outcome of a project participation process. Picture 6 presents an analysis of team cohesion at participation in 4Children project.

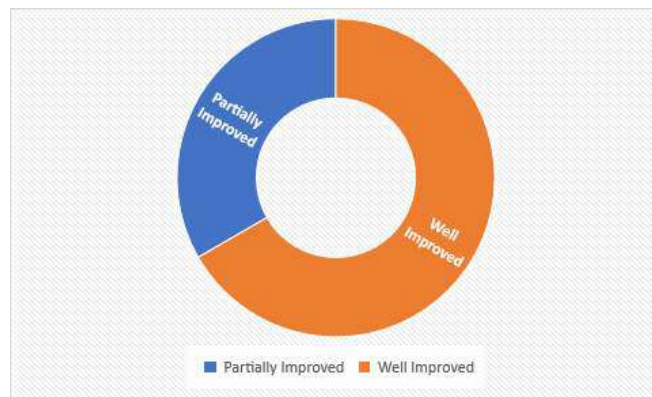


Picture 6: Team Cohesion during Participation in 4 Children Project (Source: Data Analysis)

The finding reveals that 57% of actions that strengthen team cohesion in 4Children are partially improved. This shows that participation has been taken up as a mechanism to strengthen team cohesion in 4Children project. The process of participation in the project was identified to be engaging and encouraging. Areas identified that require improvement were project team feeling encouraged to participate in project management activities, and project leaders helping the team to understand the project vision. Management

6.4 Building Cohesion Through Conflict Management

The section focus on how effective conflict management approach could be a way of strengthening team cohesion. Every team is bound to face one conflict or the other but relies on a how the team is able to resolve conflict and re-converged. The analysis looks at how 4Children responses to conflicts and strengthen team cohesion. Picture 7 presents findings of analysis showing level of improvement in conflict management in 4Children and how it affects team cohesion.



Picture 7: Analysis showing level of improvement in conflict management and team cohesion (Source: Data Analysis)

The finding shows that 4Children project has been able to effectively manage its team conflicts, working towards keeping the team as a single performing entity. The analysis reveals that 75% of expected actions on team cohesion related to conflict have well improved in the project. A few areas for improvement are around gaps in mechanism for complaints. Team complaints were currently being managed and resolved by line managers, and in few cases, refer to the project lead. 4Children demonstrates strong capacity in strengthen team cohesion through an effective conflict management process.

VII. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

An effective or performing team cannot emerge suddenly. It takes a lot of commitment from the project lead or manager to ensure the team building and retention process is ensued. Importantly, building a team is a process and undergoes developmental stages. 4Children demonstration of improving in sustaining cohesion in the team could be linked to better understanding of the team development process. Research have shown that a successful team have maintained a known development pathway (Daft and Wolff, 2001). Interesting, moving from a successful team to a performing team would require that the team exhibit key behaviour that keep them together and focus towards the goal. Ramayah (2003) posited that two main factors that increases the chance of a team to be refer to

as a performing team is related to their orientation and clearing of the team charter. A performing team is more away of the why the team should be together and what they tend to gain or lose as one cohesive team.

The finding from the analysis revealed that the project feedback is slowly improving. It is important to mention that feedback is a significant aspect of team cohesion. Furthermore, evidence have shown that a team can improve its cohesion is provided with information about their performance and how to seek support for improvement (Bradley & Frederic, 1997). This refers to setting up a mechanism to motivate the team through feedback. It is difficult for each team member is feel satisfy or rewarding when there is no process of providing objective summary of what worked and what can be improved. Feedback has been mentioned to be one of the effective way to strengthen team cohesion. However, poor feedback has led to destroying team bonding and creates a demotivation factor which affects team members' commitment to the team charter (Smith, 1996). For feedback to be a channel of strengthening team cohesion, it has to positive, fair and growth inspiring.

Another factor of team cohesion identified in the analysis was participation. The project team fairly improved in their level of building cohesion in getting team members to participate in project activities. Participation can be effective when the team vision is well articulated. Teams perform better when they are aware of team's vision, and this further help the team to participate effectively (Kets De Vries, 1999). Vision motivates, directs and refocuses the team to work together and support each other in achieving its goal. A cohesive team will spend time, energy and other resources understanding the unique and mutually agreed vision of the team (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Once the team is able to establish a unique vision, it is easy to be involved, participate more and stay focused with the project results.

Importantly, creating team vision successfully is a process of discovery and has to be participatory. All team members have to feel free to share their vision for the team and work towards disagreeing to agree of what could be a mutual understanding of the team. (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). The team's vision also directs the goal and objectives and what should be achieved by the team. Participating in the visioning process gives the team members opportunity to analysis how their individual roles aligns with the team vision and what can be done in supporting each other to achieve success as a team. This is the height of a performing team, otherwise refers to as a cohesive team. Participation as a factor of building a cohesive team is also asserted by Flynn (1997) to have emotional intelligence. A team that can trust each other, develop strong sense of self-esteem, promotes team's identity and have confident in its abilities and competencies to achieve as one (Beam, 2012).

Conflict management has also been identified as a factor of team cohesion. Result of analysis reveals that 4Children project significantly improved in managing conflict among its team members. This is laudable as the project recognizes that an effective conflict management approach is critical to keeping the team together and focus on results. Francis and Young (1979) posited that in every team, conflicts are bound to occur, as a result of individual differences, values, diversity and perceptions. Conflict is not meant to destroy the team but to mend the team ideas to become better. Conflict comes as disagreement and is in itself the reason why teams should be more effective. In order words, in team without disagreement or conflicting ideas is experiencing some form of domination. The more people are allowed to express concerns, views and opinions, it further build confident that the environment is nontoxic and accommodating, and breed better results (Harris and Harris, 1996). On the other hand, team differences not properly managed will affect working relationship and of course cohesion. It is therefore important that project managers should develop capacity in

understanding, managing and resolving disagreement in teams. This is critical as poor management of team differences can either strengthen cohesion or create a dysfunction team.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Poor management of the team storming and norming process can lead to attrition and redundancy in the team. Project manager's experience in team development and management is a necessary requisite in getting the team out of the storming and norming stage of development. Most projects are challenged at the storming and norming stage of development. At this stage, the team members develop some confidence to be greatly involved in the project management process. Whenever such expression of interest is poorly managed, it could result to demotivation and in turn affects project outputs.

Feedback can be a way of helping team build cohesion especially when executed systematically and fairly. The process of feedback in the team builds assurance, motivates team to perform more and as well get others challenged to be part of the performing team. A team without a feedback will face issue of situation of assumptions, where team members may insinuate poor performance, discrimination and low morale to perform. It is therefore importance for project managers to inculcate attributes of requesting, receiving and responding to feedback. This process can be systematic and should be fair enough to allow for team members to appreciate the essence of the feedback.

When team feels well informed and motivated, it is easy to get the team to drive towards the project results. This further demonstrates that participation can also be a way of getting the team motivation and informed about the project vision and outcome. Sometimes, team members withdraw from a project management process or show no interest because there are not empowered, informed and equipped to make meaningful contribution. Participation can therefore empower the team and gradually people feel satisfied to work and support each other. This

therefore makes participation a tool to strengthen team cohesion. Project managers and leadership should include team members participates across all project management activities, to enable delegation to be more effective. As such, team are more equipped and empowered to support each other towards achieving the project goal.

Conflict can be one of ways team motivation is gradually affected. A project with no strong mechanism and commitment to resolve conflict may degenerate a team that is ill-fate and capable of losing interest in the project outcome. Conflict distracts project team from the results. This is why project management should develop a mechanism that allows team to communicate and share issues of concerns. The project management structure should also ensure that reported conflicts are addresses promptly. Effective conflict management is also one of the ways of strengthening team cohesion and should be promoted in all projects.

Conclusively, findings revealed key strengths and pitfalls in team cohesion in 4Children project. Relatively, findings identified effective team participation, feedback and conflict management as key elements of team cohesion. These elements are most needed when going through the stages of team development. This further affirms that these elements are important in keeping the team together towards becoming a performing team.

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