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Building a high performance project team: A model for Nigerian organizations

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Abstract

Project management is successful when top management and project team are totally concerned and dedicated to realizing the project's objective. The team concept is vital to the success of any organization's project. High performance project teams become champions, create breakthrough products, exceed customers' expectations and get projects realized ahead of scheduled and under budget. The paper advocates that effective project managers are indispensable to building a high performance project team: They recruit team members; conduct meetings; manage a reward system that encourages team work; orchestrate correct decision making; resolve conflicts and rejuvenate team spirit when energy wanes amongst other things. The paper recommends that Nigerian organizations that desire to be competitive and exceed shareholders expectations must imbibe the principles of building a high-performance project team.

Introduction

Successful project management regardless of the organizational structure is only as good as the individuals and leaders who are managing the key functions. Project management is not a one-person operation; it requires a group of individuals dedicated to the achievement of a specific goal/objective, (Kerzner, 2002:154). Because each project is unique, the project management process allows each project to have its own policies, procedures, rules and standards provided they fall within broad company guidelines. Each project must be recognized by top management so that the project manager has the delegated authority necessary to enforce the policies, procedures, rules and standards.

Project management is successful only if the project manager and his team are totally concerned and dedicated to the successful completion of the project. This requires each team member of the project team and office to have a good understanding of the

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fundamental project requirements which include project planning, project implementation, project direction, customer liaison and project evaluation and control. The team work concept is vital to the success of a project. High performing teams become champions, create breakthrough products, exceed customer expectations and get projects done ahead of schedule and within budget limit. They are bonded together by mutual interdependency and a common goal or vision. They trust each other and exhibit a high level of collaboration (Gray and Larson, 2008:350).

Generally, the level of project management culture in Nigeria is quite poor especially in the public sector (Ewurum et al, 2009). However, very few organizations in the organized private sector mainly the multinational corporations (MNCs), are gradually embracing team approach in project management and this has accounted for their success and marginal growth over the years. There is need therefore for a paradigm shift to institutionalize project management best practices and build capacity needed for national development. There are a number of reference points from around the world. In the United States of America, for instance, Project Management Institute (P.M.I) has worked closely with the U.S. government at all levels, particularly at the department of defence to ensure best practices in delivery of projects and the procurement processes. In the U.K, the office of Government Commerce has made 'Prince 2' a standard for all public projects. The same scenario also plays out in Dubai where project management is used largely in project execution (Babayaju, 2010:55). So with the increasing realization of benefits of project management in organizations and the key role it plays in the delivery of successful projects and programmes, most proactive private organizations in the globalized world now have in-house project management offices (PMO) or project management department. The Nigerian organizations cannot afford to be left out in this trend.

This paper attempts to highlight the characteristics of a high performance project team; explain the five stage team development model used in advanced economies, citing the conditions necessary for its development. It will also examine the barriers to high performance project team development. Finally, the paper will explain in a methodological format the steps any Nigerian organization may adopt in building a high performance project team for it to survive in volatile business environment like ours.

Conceptual framework

Imaga et al, (2005:1) define a project as a scientifically evolved work plan devised to achieve a specific objective within a specified period of time. Newman et al (1987:140) also see it as a cluster of activities that is relatively separate and clear-cut. A project has a distinct mission and a clear-cut termination point. While project has several definitions, a simple and relatively inclusive one is that a project is a

sequence of tasks performed to achieve a unique goal within a specific time frame (Mingus, 2002). Uniqueness is the key word. It is what separates projects from operations and what makes them more difficult to manage. To standardize further on the definition of the word, the Project Management Institute (PMI) in its Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) Guide defines a project as a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique project or service. The above definitions are supported by Anuolam (1997) and UNIDO (1986:5). Project management is the planning, organizing, directing and controlling of organization's resources for a relatively short-term objective that has been established to complete specific goals and objectives (Kerzner, 2002:4). For the Project Management Institute (PMI), project management is "the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet or exceed stakeholders' needs and expectations. It is designed to make better use of existing resources by getting work to flow horizontally as well as vertically within the project organizational environment. Levine (1988:295), in defining project management draws a sharp distinction between project management and functional management. He points out that functional management is concerned with the management of enterprises as going concerns against project management which concerns itself with the management of activities with a specific set of objectives, constrained by time, cost and quality performance. Project management therefore involves pursuing the life cycle of a project from conceptualization to completion in a turnkey style. Project management cannot succeed unless a good project manager is in control.

A project manager is the individual responsible for the success or failure of a project in terms of time, cost and technical performance (Ewurum et al. 2009:35). He provides the management and leadership necessary to bind the people and group from different departments and companies working on a project into one managerial organization and team. Teams are a special form of task group that have become increasingly popular in today's business organizations. A team is a group of workers that functions as a unit, often with little or no supervision, to carry out work related tasks, functions and activities (Kirkman and Rosen, 2000:55). In a project environment, project team connotes all functional contributors to the project, as well as the members of the project office (Pinto and Slevin (1987). A dedicated project team is an organizational structure in which all of the resources needed to accomplish a project are assigned full time to the project (Gray and Larson, 2008:566). The project team concept is the optimum approach for completing a project when viewed solely from the standpoint of what is best for completing the project.

As more and more companies embrace project management as a critical vehicle for realizing corporate objectives, they are creating centralized project offices (Pos) to oversee and improve the management of projects. The project office (PO) is the unit responsible for the continued support of consistent application of selection criteria,

standards and procedures, training of and general assistance to project managers for continuous improvement and use of best practices.

Characteristics of high-performing project team

The magic and power of teams is captured in the term “synergy” which is derived from the Greek word “sunergos”: which means ‘working together’. There is positive and negative synergy. Social scientists generally agree that there are several indicators of effective and ineffective teams. At any point in the life of a team, the project managers should be aware of certain indicators that make for team effectiveness. They are listed below as follows:

- The team shares a sense of common purpose, and each member is willing to work toward achieving project objectives.
- The team identifies individual talents and expertise and uses them, depending on the project’s needs at any given time. At these times, the team willingly accepts the influence and leadership of the members whose skills are relevant to the immediate task.
- Roles are balanced and shared to facilitate for the accomplishment of tasks and feelings of group cohesion and morale.
- The team exerts energy towards problem solving rather than allowing itself to be drained by interpersonal issues or competitive struggles.
- Differences of opinion are encouraged and freely expressed.
- To encourage risk taking and creativity, mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning rather than reasons for punishment.
- Members set high personal standards of performance and encourage each other to realize the objectives of the projects.
- Members identify with the team and consider it an important source of both professional and personal growth.
- High energy levels and enthusiasm.

These characteristics when well-developed will lead to higher performance levels, increased morale and a pervasive commitment to final results that can withstand almost any kind of adversity (Hodgetts, 1988:215-218).

The five stage Team Development Model

Just as infants develop in certain ways during their first months of life, many experts argue that groups develop in a predictable manner (DeMarco and Lister, 1999). One of the most popular models identifies five stages through which groups develop into effective teams:

Forming: In this initial stage, the members get acquainted with each other and understand the scope of the project. They begin to establish ground rules by trying to find out what behaviours are acceptable with respect to both the project. To find out

acceptable behaviours with respect to roles they will play, performance expectation and interpersonal relations among team members. This stage is completed once members begin to think of themselves as part of a group.

Storming: This stage is marked by a high degree of internal conflicts. Members accept that they are part of a project group but resist the constraints that the project and group place on their individuality. There is conflict over who will control the group and how decisions will be made. As these conflicts are resolved, the project manager's leadership becomes accepted and the group gets along.

Norming: Here is when close relationships develop and the group demonstrates cohesiveness. Feelings of camaraderie and shared responsibility for the project are common place. This phase is completed when the group structure solidifies and the group establishes a common set of expectations about how members should work together.

Performing: Here the teams operating structure is fully functional and accepted. The group energy and enthusiasm have moved from getting to know each other to how they will work together to accomplish the project goals.

Adjourning: For conventional groups performing is the last stage of their development. However, for project teams, there is a completion phase. During this stage, the team prepares for its own disbandment. High-performance is no longer a priority. Instead attention is focused to wrapping up the project. Responses of members at this stage vary: some members are upbeat, basking in the project team's accomplishments. Others may be depressed over loss of camaraderie and friendships garnered during the project's life.

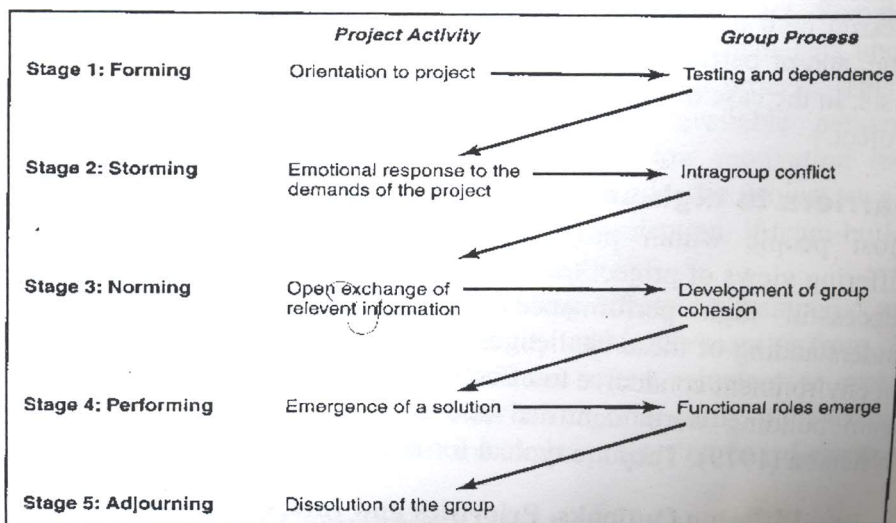


FIG. 1.0: The Five Stage Team Development Model

Source: Gray, C.F and Larson, E.W (2008:351) New York: McGraw Hill.

The above model has implications for people working as teams. First the model offers a framework for the group to understand its own development. Secondly, it helps members to understand the tensions of the storming phase and directs their attention to move toward the more productive phase. For project managers, the model urges them to have an active role in shaping group norms that will contribute to ultimate project success. After all in project management, when enthusiasm and commitment take root within a team, that project ultimately comes to life.

Experience and research indicate that high-performance project teams are more likely to develop under the following conditions:

- There are 10 or fewer members per team.
- Members volunteer to serve on the project team.
- Members serve on the project from beginning to the end.
- Members are assigned to the project full time.
- Members are part of an organization culture that fosters cooperation and trust.
- Members report solely to the project manager.
- All relevant functional areas are represented on the team.
- The project involves a compelling objective.
- Members are located within conversational distance of each other.

It must be noted that in practice, it is rare that a project manager is assigned a project that meets all of these conditions. For example, many projects' requirements dictate the active involvement of more than 10 members and may consist of a complex set of interlocking teams comprising more than 100 professionals. However, it should be stressed here that to optimize resources, team members' involvement may be part time, and/or participants may move in and out of the project team on an as-needed basis. In the case of ad hoc task forces, no member of the team works full time on the project.

Barriers to high-performance project team development

Most people within project-driven and non-project-driven organizations have differing views of project team function. These differing views can create barriers to successful high performance project team formation (Cleland, 1989). The understanding of these challenges to project team formation can help in developing an environment conducive to effective team work. The following barriers to effective team building were identified and analysed in a field study by Thamhain and Wilemon (1979). They are typical for many project environments:

- **Differing Outlooks, Priorities and Interests:** A major challenge to effective team development occurs when team members have professional objectives and interests that are different from the project objectives. These problems

are compounded when the project team relies on support organizations that have different interests and priorities.

- **Role Conflicts:** Effective team formation efforts are thwarted when role conflicts exist among the team members such as ambiguity over who does what within the project team and in external support groups.
- **Unclear Project Objectives/Outcomes:** Unclear project objectives most often lead to conflicts, ambiguities and power struggles. It becomes difficult if not impossible to define roles and responsibilities clearly.
- **Dynamic Project Environment:** Many projects operate in a continual state of flux especially in an environment like Nigeria. For instance, top management may keep changing the project scope, objectives and resource base. In some other situation; regulatory changes and unsteady client demands can affect the internal operations of a project team cohesion.
- **Power/Leadership Tussle:** Project leaders frequently indicate that this barrier most often occurs in the early phase of forming and storming. This power/leadership challenge can result in barriers to team building. These challenges are covert challenges to the project manager's ability.
- **Lack of Team Definition and Structure:** Many senior managers complain that team work is severely impaired because it lacks clearly defined task responsibilities and reporting structure. This situation is pervasive in computer systems and Research and Development (R & D). A common pattern is that a support department is charged with a task but no one leader is delegated the responsibility. Consequently some personnel are working on the project but not entirely clear on the extent of their responsibilities.
- **Team Member Selection:** This obstacle develops when team members feel unfairly treated or threatened during the staffing of a project. Sometimes project's personnel are assigned to a team by functional managers and the project manager has little or no input into the selection process. This can impede team cohesiveness. The assignment of "available personnel" syndrome can result in several problems such as low motivation levels, discontent and uncommitted team members. As a rule, the project manager should have more power as regards team member selection, if team-building efforts will be fruitful (Thamhain and Wilemon, 1979).
- **Credibility of Project Leader:** Team-building efforts are hampered when the project leader suffers from poor credibility within the team or from other managers. In such cases, team members are often reluctant to make a commitment to the project or leader. Poor managerial skills, poor technical judgments or lack of experience relevant to the project on board can create credibility problems.
- **Lack of Team Member Commitment:** This barrier can come from diverse sources such as the team members having professional interest elsewhere, the feeling of insecurity that is associated with projects, the unclear nature of the

rewards that may be forthcoming upon successful completion and interpersonal conflicts within the team. For example lack of team member commitment may result from suspicious attitudes existing between the project manager and a functional support manager.

- **Communication Problems:** It is not surprising that poor communication can hinder effective team development. Poor communication exists on four major levels: problem of communication among team members, between the project manager and team members, between the project team and top management and between the project manager and clients. Often, the problem is caused by team members not keeping others informed on key project deliverables. Poor communication practices can lead to unclear objectives and poor project control, coordination and workflows.
- **Lack of Top Management Support:** Project managers often indicate that top management support and commitment is unclear and subject to waxing and waning over the project life cycle. This behaviour can lead to an uneasy feeling among team members and lead to low levels of enthusiasm and project commitment. Sometimes top management does not create a conducive environment for the project team at the outset and give the team timely feedback on their performance and activities during the life of the project.

Project managers who are successfully performing their role not only recognize these challenges but also know when they are likely to occur in the project life cycle. And as such, they take preventive actions thereby fostering a project environment that is conducive to effective team work.

Steps to building high-performance project teams

Effective project managers play a key role in developing high-performance project teams. They recruit members, conduct meetings, establish a team identity, create a shared vision, manage a reward system that encourages team work, orchestrate correct decision making, resolve conflicts that emerge within the team and rejuvenate the team when energy wanes. Successful project managers take advantage of situational factors that naturally contribute to team performance while improvising around those factors that inhibit team development. The following steps are noteworthy when it comes to building high performance teams:

- **Recruiting good project team members:** The process of selecting and recruiting project members varies across organizations. Two significant factors affecting recruitment are; the importance of the project on the one hand and the management structure being used to complete the project on the other. Sometimes for high-priority projects that are critical to the future of the organization, the project manager will be given virtual-carte-blanche to select whomever he or she deems necessary. For less significant projects, the

project manager will have to persuade personnel from other areas within the organization to join the team.

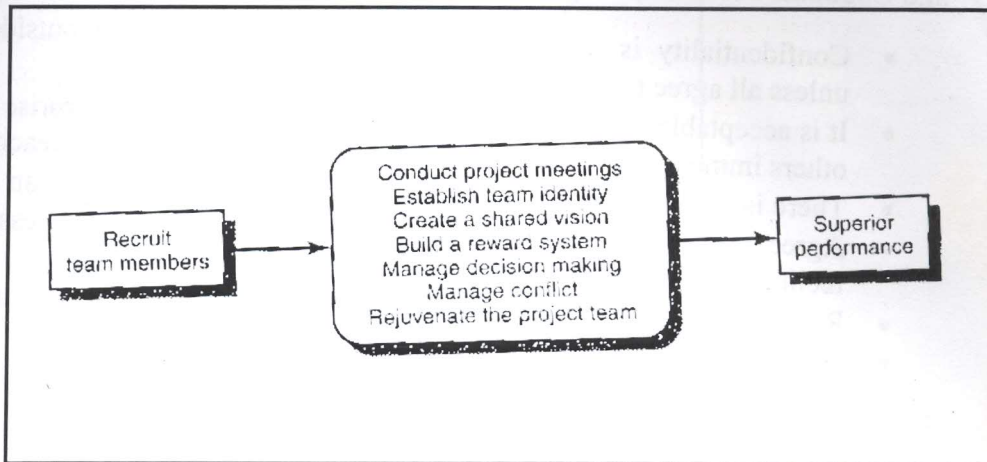


Fig. 2.0: Creating a high-Performance Project Team

Source: Gray, C.F and Larson, E.W (2008:354) New York: McGraw Hill.

In many matrix structures, the functional manager controls who is assigned to the project. The project manager will have to work with the functional manager to obtain necessary personnel. Experienced project managers stress the importance of asking for volunteers. Agreeing to work on the project is the first step toward building personal commitment to the project. Such commitment is essential to maintain motivation especially when the project hits hard times and extra effort is required (Cleland, 1997).

Conducting Project Meetings

Research on team development confirms what experienced project managers harp on; that the first project kick-off meeting is critical to the early functioning of the project team (Frame, 1995). There are three main objectives project managers try to achieve during the first meeting of the project team. The first is to provide an overview of the project, its scope and objectives, schedules, methods and procedures. The second objective is to address the interpersonal relationships that would crop up. The third and most important objective is to begin to model how the newly formed team is going to work together to complete the project. The project manager must recognize that first impressions are very important. Thus this meeting should serve as an exemplary role model for subsequent meetings and reflect the leader's style.

During the course of establishing operational procedures, the project manager through word and deed should strive to establish the norms for team interaction. Below are examples of some of the norms researchers have found associated with

high-performance teams, (Leavitt and Lipman-Blumen, 1995:110; and Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000:485).

- Confidentiality is maintained; no information is shared outside the team unless all agree to it.
- It is acceptable to be in trouble, but it is not acceptable to surprise others. Tell others immediately when deadlines or milestones will not be reached.
- There is zero tolerance for bulling a way through a problem or an issue.
- Agree to disagree, but when a decision has been made, regardless of personal feelings, move forward.
- Respect outsiders and do not flaunt one's position on the project team.
- Hard work does not get in the way of having fun.

The project kick-off meeting is one of several kinds of meetings required to complete a project. Other meetings include status report meetings, problem solving meetings and audit meetings.

Establishing a Team identity: One of the challenges project managers often face in building a team is the lack of full-time involvement of team members. Specialists work on different phases of the project and spend the majority of their time and energy elsewhere. They are often members of multiple teams. Each competing for their time and allegiance. Many of them see a specific project as a distraction (Frame, 1982). Project managers need to try to make the project team as tangible as possible to the participants by developing a unique team identity to which participants can become emotionally attached. Team meetings, co-location of team members, team names and team rituals are common vehicles for doing so.

Creating a shared vision: Unlike project scope statements, which include specific cost, completion dates and performance requirements, a vision involves the less tangible aspects of project performance. It refers to an image a project team holds in common about how the project will look upon completion, how they will work together and/or how customers will accept the project. A shared vision unites professionals with different backgrounds and agendas to a common aspiration. It helps motivate members to subordinate their individual agendas and do what is best for the project. Again a shared vision for a project fosters commitment to the long term and discourages expedient responses that collectively dilute the quality of the project. The key is discovering what excites people about a project being able to articulate this source of excitement in an appealing manner and finally protecting and nurturing this source of excitement throughout the duration of the project.

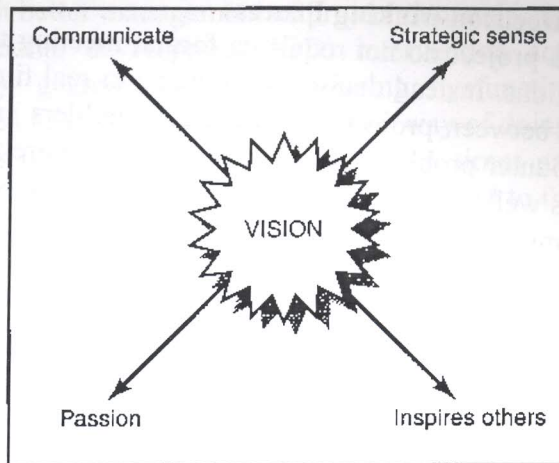


Fig 3.0: Requirements for an Effective Project Vision

Source: Gray, C.F and Larson, E.W (2008:362) New York: McGraw Hill.

Managing Project Reward Systems

Project managers are responsible for managing the reward system that encourages team performance and extra effort. One advantage they have is that often project work is inherently satisfying, whether it is manifested in an inspiring vision or simple sense of accomplishment. Projects provide participants with a change in scenery, a chance to learn new skills and an opportunity to break out of their departmental cocoon.

Most project managers from research findings advocate the use of group rewards. Because most project work is a collaborative effort, it only makes sense that the reward system should encourage team work (Kirkman et al, 2002:65-70). Recognizing individual members regardless of their contributions or accomplishments can distract from team unity. Project management work is highly interdependent, so it can become problematic to distinguish who truly deserves additional credit. Cash bonuses and incentives need to be linked to project priorities. Therefore, it makes no sense to reward a team for completing their work early if controlling cost was the number one priority. Project rewards need to have lasting significance on team members. Many project organizations convert cost into vacation rewards, sometimes with corresponding time off. Wise project managers negotiate a discretionary budget so that they can reward teams surpassing milestones with gift certificates, coupons to popular restaurants or tickets to sporting events. For instance, Nigerian Breweries Plc paid an all round trips to their best business manager and some national distributors to watch the opening ceremony of the recently concluded World Cup tagged South Africa, 2010.

Orchestrating the Decision-Making Process

Most decisions on a project do not require a formal meeting to discuss alternatives and determine solutions. Instead decisions are made in real time as part of the daily interaction patterns between project managers, stakeholders and team members. At times, projects encounter problems and decisions that require the collective wisdom of team members as well as relevant stakeholders. Group decision making should be used when it will improve the quality of important decisions. This is often the case with complex problems that require the input of a variety of different specialists. Group decision making is also advocated when strong commitment to the decision is needed and there is a low probability of acceptance if only one person makes the decision. Group decision making would be called for with controversial problems which have a major impact on the project outcome or when trust is low within the project team. Project managers play a pivotal role in guiding the group decision making process. They facilitate the discussion within the group so that the team reaches a consensus on the best possible solution.

Managing conflict within the Project

Conflicts are a way of life in a project structure and can generally occur at any level in the organizations usually the result of conflicting objectives (Wilemon 1983:290-292). Critics of project management principles assert that the major reason why many companies avoid change over to a project management organizational structure is either fear or an inability to handle the resulting conflicts. Disagreements and conflicts naturally emerge within a project team during the life of the project. Participants naturally will disagree over priorities, allocation of resources, the quality of specific work, solutions to discovered problems and so forth. Some conflicts support the goals of the group and improve project performance. On the other hand, conflicts can also hinder group performance. For instance, initial disagreements can escalate into heated arguments with both parties storming out of the "war room" and refusing to work together. Thamhain and Wilemon's (1975:31-41) research reveal that the sources of conflict change as projects progresses along the project life cycle.

Rejuvenating the Project Team

During the course of a long project, a team sometimes drifts off course and loses momentum. At this stage, the project manager needs to swing into action to realign the team with the project objectives and step on the pedal. There are both informal and formal ways of rejuvenating a tiring team. An instance could be to have the project sponsor give a pep talk to the team. In other cases, a friendly challenge can reinvigorate a team. For example, the project sponsor can give a three-course meal if the project gets back on track and hit the next milestone.

A formal action is to allow the team to undergo a team-building session devoted to improving the work processes of the team. This meeting is particularly appropriate if the project manager senses that the team is approaching a transition point in its development. The goal of such a session is to improve the project team's

effectiveness through better management of project demands and group processes. It is one of organizational development (OD) intervention activities (Harvey and Brown, 1988:55-60), geared towards eliminating dysfunctional behaviour. The project team evaluates its performance, analyzes its way of doing things and attempts to develop strategies to improve its operation. Often times an external consultant skilled in Organizational Development Intervention is hired to facilitate the session.

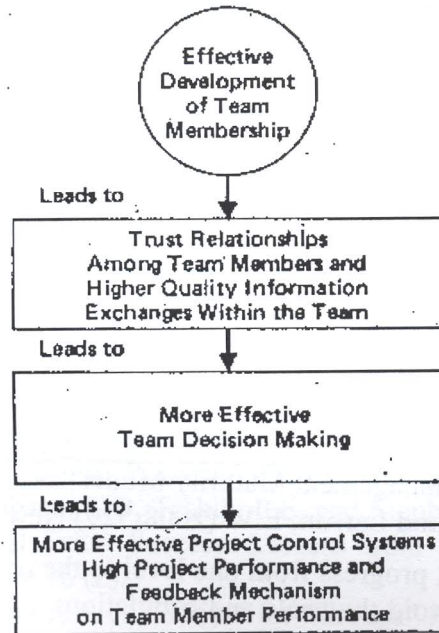


FIG. 4.0: Team Building Outcomes

Source: Kerzner, H. (2002:251) New Delhi: CBS Publishers and Distributors.

Application of Organization Project Management Maturity:

Given the fact that many executives today view their company as a stream of projects, project management permeates the entire organization, mandating that maturity is necessary. So only those companies that want to stay in business and remain competitive should pursue maturity. The purpose of a project management maturity model is to enable organizations to assess their progress in implementing the best practice in their industry and continuously move to improvement. It is important to understand that the model does not ensure success; it serves only as a measuring stick and an indicator of progress.

The term maturity model was coined in the late 1980s from a research study by the United States government and the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) at Carnegie Mellon University. The government wanted a tool to predict successful software development by contractors. The outcome of this research was the Capability Maturity Model (CMM). The model focuses on guiding and assessing organizations

in implementing concrete best practices of managing software development projects. Since its development the model is used across all industries.

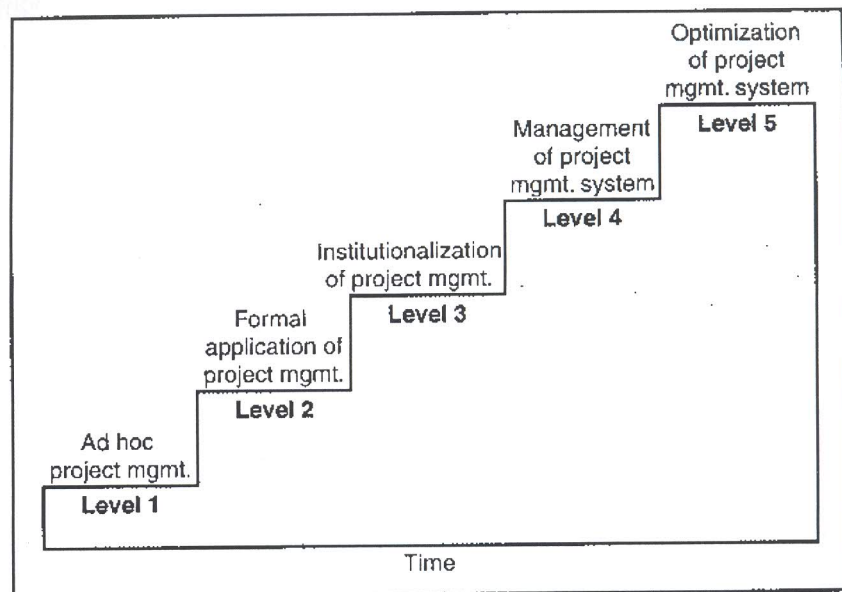


Fig. 5.0: Project Management Maturity Model

Source: Gray, C.F and Larson, E.W (2008:529) New York: McGraw Hill.

In the above model, progress from one level to the next will not occur overnight. Just as a child cannot avoid the trials and tribulations of being a teenager, people within an organization have to work through the unique challenges of and problems of each level to get to the next level. Learning of this magnitude naturally takes time and cannot be avoided by using quick fixes or simple remedies.

Conclusion

In today's rapidly changing world, the risk of failing to develop new products for the market on time is the difference between success and failure. The magic and power of project teams to orchestrate and manage projects within an organizational framework cannot be deemphasized. So with the increasing realization of benefits of application of project management principles and practices, the Nigerian organizations that want to remain competitive and exceed stakeholders' and shareholders' expectations cannot afford to be left out in this phenomenal global practice. This paper has given useful guide on how to achieve project teams' effectiveness, including how to overcome bottlenecks and resolve group crises.

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