

Stress management as a factor of project success

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to an important aspect, influencing the effectiveness of the project teams in a multi-project environment, and more concretely it tries to demonstrate the necessity of stress management, as well as to identify opportunities for this. The authors focus consecutively on aspects such as: stress management as a factor of effectiveness of the project activity in a multi-project environment, explaining the essence and importance of the professional stress as a psychological phenomenon, the negative consequences of the stress and the potential stressors at the work place; necessity of stress management in a multi-project environment, explaining the essence and characteristics of the multi-project organization as a natural environment of the project teams and presenting this type of environment as a stress factor; opportunities for stress management in a multi-project environment, including organizational mechanisms and psychological techniques.

Keywords: occupational stress, project team, multi-project environment

1 Introduction

In recent decades the project work spread in almost all business and non-profit spheres – it is extremely difficult to find out some area, which does not apply projects as effective means to realize its organizational mission, strategic and short-term goals, through maximum utilization of the available resources [1]. Among all resources, necessary for the realization of a project, the most important are the human resources and for this reason the project team is unanimously identified as a key factor of success [2]. It is confidently declared that the projects are not only “technical systems”, but “behavioral systems” as well, so it is logically the project management to focus more and more on their “human” aspects, connected with communications, leadership and other elements, oriented towards people [3].

At the same time, despite its extreme importance, the HRM remains the most poorly developed aspect of the project management, saturated with lots of ambiguities and contradictions. Especially scarce is the knowledge in the field of the project team management in a multi-project environment, which delineates as a natural work environment of more and more employees. In this context the present paper is devoted to one important aspect, influencing the effectiveness of the teams in a multi-project environment, and namely – work stress.

2 Research methods

The main *objective* of the present theoretical research is to demonstrate the necessity and opportunities for stress management in a multi-project environment. It is reached through performance of the following *tasks*: 1) To identify the stress management as a key factor of project work effectiveness in a multi-project environment; 2) To discuss opportunities for stress management in a multi-project environment.

3 Results

Occupational stress is treated as a main factor of work activity effectiveness, including the project work. This determines the necessity of searching effective mechanisms for its management, which involves its recognition as a psychological phenomenon, consequences and potential sources, and also as specificity in a multi-project environment.

3.1 STRESS MANAGEMENT AS A FACTOR OF THE PROJECT WORK EFFECTIVENESS

Stress could be defined in many different ways. Selye defined it in 1936 as “a nonspecific response of the body to any demand, whether it is caused by, or results in, pleasant or unpleasant conditions”, and later as “a state of the organism manifested as a general adaptation syndrome [4].

- *Occupational stress as a psychological phenomenon.* Lazarus and Folkman suggested in 1981 that stress can be thought of as resulting from an “imbalance between demands and resources” or as occurring when “pressure exceeds one’s perceived ability to cope”. Work-related stress is defined as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work” [5].

High levels of stress at the workplace could result in: poor decision-making; poor timekeeping; increasing mistakes, leading to more clients’ complains; increasing sickness absences; poor physical and mental health and wellbeing; poor workplace relations. Stress can affect the business: lost working days; high staff turnover; low morale; reduced work performance; financial losses [6].

The most common stressors at the workplace are: work overload, lack of control, job insecurity, poor work relationships, poor work-life balance, lack of resources and communication, insufficient pay and benefits [7].

- *Necessity of stress management in a project*

environment. From the theory and practice is known that the staff members have a better performance when they are relaxed, in harmony and in emotional equilibrium. Therefore, it is extremely important to make efforts to overcome the occupational stress and to regain the emotional balance of the employees.

Stress management was developed and premised on the idea that stress is not a direct response to a stressor but rather one's resources and ability to cope mediate the stress response and are amenable to change, thus allowing stress to be controllable [8].

The contemporary organization is more and more oriented to the application of the project approach in the implementation of a big part of its activities, which often leads to the existence of a great number of varied, simultaneously realized projects. It turns out that about 90% of all projects are realized in a multi-project environment, which makes it a natural environment of the project teams. In the course of time the researchers come up to the conclusion that besides all advantages of the project work, its realization in this type of environment actually is characterized by many potential negative effects upon the psychological well-being of the project participants and hence – upon the effectiveness of the projects.

According to many authors, the multi-project environment creates extremely intensive work load, which can have strongly negative effects on the health, professional development and work-life balance of the employees [9]. It is underlined that the combining of many parallel activities the high work intensity and increased individual responsibility can provoke healthy problems, feeling of overload, difficult synchronization of the professional and personal engagements and interests, and ultimately more stress for the staff [10].

3.2 POSSIBILITIES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT IN A PROJECT ENVIRONMENT

There are many options for stress management in multi-project environment, treating the stress sources, as well as their effects.

- *Organizational mechanisms for stress management.* These mechanisms are directly connected with the elimination (reduction) of the causes of stress. One possible instrument is *improving the manager's attitude*, i.e.: attention to the team members' competencies and providing training where is needed; monitoring of the workload, developing workload plans/schedules and setting realistic dead-lines; applying effective approach to problem solving; process monitoring in order to improve them; encouraging the position rotation/job enrichment; ensuring the employees that they can do their job/empowerment; coaching instead of pressure; recognizing the necessity of simple support or counseling; encouraging the project team members' development; informing the team for everything that happens in the organization; formulating clear goals and objectives; clarifying the roles, expectations and communication channels; holding regular team meetings and face-to-face communication; respecting the working hours; recognizing the efforts of the team members; developing culture of non-

judgement and strategic problem solving; etc.

Another organizational mechanism for stress management is *improving the project teams staffing*. In this way it is possible to achieve optimal distribution of the human resources between the projects in the organization, which to prevent (or even reduce) their excessive work load and respectively all arising negative effects upon their psychological comfort, productivity and development. The projects essentially differ according to their complexity and the contents of the included activities; therefore it is logically the competencies and the personal (psychological) characteristics of the participants to be very different. Practically the type (characteristics) of the project itself should determine the profile of the successful project team, i.e. the suitable combination of participants as professional skills, as well as personal characteristics and preferences.

Third possible organizational mechanism for stress management is *improving the project team management*. Not always the project managers are successful in the team management for many reasons. For example, sometimes they lack skills in the specific technical area of the project, or management skills – in the area of the administrative management (planning, organizing and controlling of work, including delegation of tasks and conducting team meetings) and leadership (interpersonal dynamics, conflict management, team motivation). This creates prerequisites for stress and dissatisfaction of the project teams and eventually troubles the realization of the projects in the frames of the determined requirements for time, cost, and quality. Therefore, the improvement of the team management through provision and application of a suitable collection of competencies and management style should also be examined as a possibility for stress management in project environment.

- *Psychological techniques for stress management.* According to Selye, the problem is not to avoid or eliminate stress, but to protect us from the harmful stress (distress). It could be overcome not by avoiding work and efforts but engaging in activity that is motivating and pleasant for us. Distress is not related to the working hours or the work complexity, but to the degree of work dissatisfaction [4].

Some concrete psychological techniques for stress management: 1) At personal level – tracking the stressors and reactions; developing healthy responses – exercise, yoga, breathing, mindfulness, good sleep, limiting caffeine intake; establishing work-life boundaries; finding time to replenish and return to the pre-stress level of functioning – work disconnecting; getting support from family members and friends; resisting perfectionism; flipping negative thinking; looking for humor in each situation. 2) At organizational level – getting support from the supervisor and co-workers; prioritizing and organizing – development of balanced schedule; balancing work and personal life; prioritizing tasks; planning regular short breaks; breaking projects into small steps; delegating responsibility; making compromises; etc.

4 Conclusion

One of the essential reasons for the unsuccessful realization of the projects in a multi-project environment is the stress

provoked by the simultaneous participation in too many projects, each of them having strict restrictions regarding budget, time and quality. Therefore, the management of

stress in the project team is an important factor for elaboration of the project work. Fortunately, there exist many possibilities for this.

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