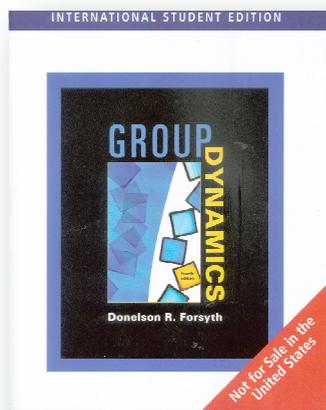


Group Dynamics, by Donelson R Forsyth

A book review by Ian Jay

A key aspect of managing teams is a sound grasp of the underlying dynamics driving behaviour. This is probably more important than technical knowledge about the project goals, or the management tools for planning and reporting progress towards them. This book is not aimed specifically at the project manager but it does provide a reliable and well researched source of information about this dimension of management.



Project managers are faced with a multitude of challenges. Some of these revolve around the objectives of the project itself and the technical difficulties related to it. Others are addressed in the many text books explaining how to plan and then control a project using a wide variety of tools and techniques. However, there is a third area of complexity that has to be mastered if success in the project is to be assured, it is the subject of this book, Group Dynamics. It involves being able to manage the interactions of the project team and other stakeholders.

An excellent source of in-depth knowledge about groups and teams is provided by this text, now in its fourth edition. Coverage of the subject area begins with the individual and then progresses to the development of groups. From these foundations, issues common in projects are explored in great depth. These include conflict, influence, communication,

performance management and team roles.

At the level of the individual, the text begins by exploring the way that individuals from different cultures express dimensions relating to their feeling of 'self worth'. For instance, Americans tend to identify individualistic traits as their valuable traits. Chinese people in contrast are more likely to identify their value in terms of group roles they fulfil. These are important considerations in the South African context where multicultural teams are common.

On the subject of selection of team members, there is a tendency of groups to be attracted by and to 'extroverts'. This trait can become a criterion in the selection of team members, instead of dimensions such as competency, or skill. This is because extroverts are easily recognised and tend to be attractive to others. An understanding of these dynamics can enhance the project manager's ability to select appropriate team members.

A critical aspect of high performing teams is their cohesiveness. The text uses the example of an inexperienced American ice hockey team to explain how this trait evolves and can be developed in a group. This particular team defeated a professional Russian team in the 1980 Winter Olympics against all expectations. The victory was attributed to the cohesive nature of the team when faced by a vastly superior opponent. The belief of their leadership in their abilities and their own shared understanding of a common goal are identified as the keys to their success. Notably, traits such as confidence and optimism were not part of this dynamic.

Other chapters in the book explore in detail how a minority view can be brought to prevail over the opinions of the group. Other chapters address the development of communication networks within groups and how these impact on performance in different task settings.

There is a chapter devoted to leadership. What has emerged from extensive research in this area is that leaders perform two key sets of activity. The first is well described in books about Project Management; it includes actions such as setting standards, monitoring compliance and giving feedback. These are the task oriented activities of a leader. In addition there is a second set of activities that focus on interpersonal relations. Examples of this 'relationship leadership' behaviour include the provision of emotional support, encouragement and other acts that boost morale. A large part of the book is about the kind of action that is appropriate for this kind of leadership and the situations where it is applicable.

The book itself is presented as a Course Text book for students. The early chapters cover research methods. It is very well referenced and provides a useful source for researchers who want to find more material on the areas discussed. However its value reaches far beyond the academic establishment. There are a number of well described and interesting cases that are used to illustrate the points being made. These are skilfully blended into the academic content of the text. This has the effect of making it a very readable book. Perhaps its greatest strength is that it can be opened to any topic and by reading that section only the reader is provided with interesting and insightful knowledge. For the practitioner this is an invaluable text that can be kept close to hand for reference and reflection when managing the team.

Group Dynamics, Fourth Edition, by Donelson R Forsyth. (2006) Thomson Wadsworth. ISBN9780495007296

Published in the September / October 2008 edition of ProjectNet Magazine

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