7 things I learned to build highly effective onsite/offshore teams.

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Abstract

If you are a supervisor or a team leader, you know how difficult it is to manage distributed teams with constant pressure to perform and deliver quality products/services on time. This is especially true for offshore teams in different time zones, regions, cultures, and working styles. If you do not put in the effort to develop effective strategies to manage these teams, it may eventually lead to low team morale, disgruntled employees, and, most importantly, poor performance. This is the reason why companies are investing millions of dollars in training, organizational, and team development.

From my 20+ years of experience working in tech and managing teams, I realized that as leaders, we not only need to consider the structure of the team but also the alignment and purpose of the team's work. This is to ensure that we have clarity on the value the team creates. In my opinion, a high-performing team flourishes in an environment where they know exactly how they contribute to the organization's purpose.

In this talk, I will share key strategies to improve the team's performance in delivering high-value products/services to customers irrespective of their cultural and geographical differences. I will share proven techniques that help build high-performing distributed teams. The tools and approaches I discuss will give the attendees a strategic and transparent way to manage team processes and communication. These concepts will reinforce how to implement the principles in a real-world environment working with onsite/offshore teams to solve the pressing challenges.

Biography

Venkat Edagottu is a Senior Manager at Hitachi Vantara. He has 20+ years of working in the IT industry across various domains that include - Banking, Healthcare, Insurance, Automobile, and Finance with globally distributed teams. He is passionate about aligning the team's goals with the company vision. This has helped him to have continued success within consulting and leadership areas focused on collaboration, operational excellence & organizational development. He loves inspiring team members and creating diverse and inclusive work environments. In his spare time, he is an active blogger, conference speaker, and passionate learner. He can be reached at edagottu@gmail.com, and you connect with him on LinkedIn - https://www.linkedin.com/in/venkat-edagottu/

Introduction

Suppose you are a supervisor or a team leader. You know how difficult it is to manage distributed teams with constant pressure to perform and deliver quality products and services on time. This is especially true for offshore teams in different time zones, regions, cultures, and working styles. If you do not put in the effort to develop effective strategies to manage these teams, it may eventually lead to low team morale, disgruntled employees, and, most importantly, poor performance. This is the reason why companies are investing millions of dollars in training, organizational, and team development.

From my 20+ years of experience working in tech and managing teams, I realized that as leaders, we need to consider the structure of the team and the alignment and purpose of the work the team does. This is to ensure that we have clarity on the value the team creates. In my opinion, a high-performing team flourishes in an environment where they know exactly how they contribute to the organization's purpose.

Currently, 16% of companies (Steward, 2020) are 100% remote, and 77% of remote workers say they're more productive when working from home. A Gartner survey of company leaders found that 82% plan to allow employees to work at least part of the time after the pandemic remotely, and 47% will enable employees to work from home full-time (Gartner, 2020). This being the case, building highly motivated teams across the globe becomes a huge challenge but is not impossible.

Here are seven strategies to build high-performing teams

1 Time Zones

One of the significant challenges of working in distributed teams is streamlining the collaboration process. Time zones become crucial in a distributed team environment to achieve high productivity.

Alternate between different meeting times when scheduling meetings across time zones. This lets your team know that everyone gets a chance to have a discussion that is convenient to their respective work regions. Also, make sure you plan.

Schedule critical meetings at an appropriate time suitable for onsite and offshore teams (Asia Pacific region, Europe, Middle East, and Africa). Working with remote teams is slightly different from co-located teams.

For example, if someone asks you to send a status report by 9 pm, mention whether it is IST, EST, or UK time. Be proactive in scheduling meetings. If required, you may need two-time slots for the sessions since not one-time best suits, everyone. Working with people around the world and traveling, scheduling becomes more complicated. Refer to the article “Six tips for managing meetings in multiple time zones with Google Calendar” for tips for working with multiple time zones (Wolber, 2015).

For example, to create a multi-time zone event. When you fly from Kansas City to Detroit, your flight starts in a one-time zone and ends in another. You can enter the flight departure and arrival times correctly for each time zone from Google Calendar in your browser. Create a new Google Calendar event, then select the "Time zone" link to the right of the event’s end time. Check the "Use separate start and end time zones" box, then choose the time zones. Finally, enter the start and end times.

2 Communication

Lack of face-to-face interaction in the distributed teams causing communication problems while gathering requirements for one of my projects, I explain below the actual problem and how certain steps taken improved the common understanding to resolve this issue.

Use Messaging tools like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams as virtual workspaces to connect all team members. Set clear goals, deadlines, and expectations to work on tasks accordingly. Empower people to make decisions, and you check in periodically. Have regular 1:1 meeting to understand the problems/issues. Always welcome feedback and questions and listen carefully before you respond.

Understanding communication, cooperation, and trust are key. Boost team morale by giving recognition periodically. It will help if you recognize good work immediately. Having all-hands meetings on a quarterly basis is also very helpful. Poor communication also can cause friction in the team. For example, asking a team to complete a task in one week without clear expectations can cause frustration to team members due to a lack of clarity in communication.

Also, intercultural communication is essential, and you need to keep in mind the working styles in different cultures. Due to the hierarchical structure, some cultures may be hesitant to ask questions. As a leader, it is your responsibility to recognize this and encourage questions to ensure they understand it.

For example, when we say “Let’s pull the plug on that project,” a person who comes from a different cultural background may not understand the meaning of this phrase, and this could be open to different interpretations.

Here is one example how communication challenges impacted in delivery one of my projects. I was working on a critical financial solution project where my team provided end-to-end Testing services. There were issues regarding inaccurate specifications gathered by my team mistakenly. Due to the imprecise requirements, the test plan and test cases designed around the functionality had many gaps and were not usable. The client asked us to eliminate all the test cases and develop a proper test strategy to validate this more effectively within the agreed-upon release deadline. This put much pressure on our team, and there was no option but to make the requested changes.

To fill this communication gap with the client, I worked closely with various stakeholders and collected the requirements again. As a result, we could write a whole new test plan based on the new specifications. We were able to do manual and automated testing on the product and still meet the agreed-upon timelines.

3 Small work teams

Having small teams is good for managing and easily tracking progress. Many of the largest technology companies created their first successful products with teams of fewer than 10 people. Empower your team by giving them responsibilities and encouraging them. Break down goals and make sure all the team members understand them. Having a point person for each team is very helpful to know the status for tracking purposes easily. Also, diversity of thought and culture brings different perspectives which give a different dimension to the team composition.

Build cross-functional teams to understand dependencies from each other team. Form separate small groups for each work stream to discuss and chat about the deliverables related to the work stream. Breaking down goals into smaller ones and communicating them to different work teams is a good approach to achieve more progress. Also, remember that you do not need to have everyone in a meeting. Invite only those who are required to make decisions and have constructive discussions about the topic at hand. Communication channels will increase depending on the team size.

For example, in our organization, we were 100+ testing resources working on various clients. The problem was it was difficult for our leadership team to know which testers were working on what projects and also whether they were being 100% utilized. Because if they are not 100% utilized, we could assign them other high-priority tasks sitting in the backlog. I volunteered to solve this problem for our leadership team as it was leading to much confusion.

So, the first thing I did was, create a Testing Center of Excellence (TCOE). An independent body in the company that will oversee all testers. The next thing I did was, create four key areas of expertise to

classify all the testers under some logical category. Applications (ERP, CRM), Technology (Development, SOA/Integration), Performance Testing, and Test Automation. The third thing I did was schedule a meeting with Test Leads of all the projects to let them know what process I was going to follow to give everyone clear visibility of testers' work at any point in time. I made sure I answered all their questions.

Then I created a master Excel sheet for the Test leads where each one of them will update the resource name of their team and some bullet points of what tasks they were doing. Once I collected all this data, I classified the resources under the four key areas. I created an internal pool of consultants who can be assigned to various projects in the future based on their expertise. Finally, I asked the test leads to update the excel sheet at the end of each week and had a macro that scanned through all this data and gave the necessary information related to resource utilization.

This effort took me 2 months, but as a result, the leadership team had a better snapshot of resource utilization. The testing team started collaborating better as they all belonged to one group (the TCOE), and the bench resource utilization increased from 0 to 30%.

4 Seamless alignment

Misalignment happens when the team lead believes he has effectively communicated his message to his team but his expectations don't actually make it through to most of the team members.

Encourage teams to work towards common goals and objectives of the Project/Program. Make sure all the project artifacts are stored in a shared area to access by teams from onsite and onshore. You need to establish the same process for Onsite/Offshore teams while using the same set of tools, frameworks and resources. Make sure the onsite and offshore work goes seamless and place all relevant documentation in a shared folder to access for all Team members. Teams working in seamless environments do struggle with how much onsite work is completed and what tasks need to take up in order to continue the work towards completion.

Alignment happens on three levels:

1. High-level grooming with the whole team: Go through the requirements, make sure they have a common understanding, what the expectation from a testability standpoint and development standpoint and what the customer needs, what test data is needed...these all are things the whole team needs to align.

2. When the task has to complete: What are the expectations, everything can be set during the high-level planning meeting. During Product Refinement meeting, before developing a story, the business person, developer, and tester would meet together, go through the requirement and figure out whether the mockups are ready, requirements are clear, need test data, and whether everyone has the necessary resources to work on it.

3. Once the requirements are completed: show the demo to the business person to make sure the requirements were implemented according to what is needed.

5 Cross-functional Teams

A cross-functional team consists of people who have different skill sets or expertise, bringing all of them together to achieve a common goal. Backlog Refinement, Sprint Planning, Sprint Review, and Retrospective meetings for each sprint are very helpful to know what works well and what needs to be improved. Encourage the team to participate in all the team meetings and encourage them to speak up about their issues/concerns to get help from the team. Also, discuss the dependencies between various tasks that have to be accomplished.

For example, one of the biggest challenges I faced during big project teams was the struggle to work across silos. Having cross functional meetings in between multiple scrum teams where each team

dependent on other team to integrate the product, having meetings on regular basis resolved most of the interdependencies people have while delivering features.

Here is one more example from my past experience. I once worked on a Data Strategy project. The problem was the client was struggling to estimate the size of the project in terms of various cross-functional teams involved. (Data, Governance, QA, Dev, BA, UX). Also, he could not figure out the amount of testing effort it would require. So, I as a QA manager had to figure out a solution.

The first thing I did was, I scheduled a meeting with all the cross functional team involved (Data, Governance, QA, Dev, BA, UX) to understand the work and create a road map based on high-level timelines available. Next, I created a high-level estimation efforts to align with the timelines. I then sent this to various cross functional team leads to get their feedback on it before sending it to the key stakeholders.

6 Accountability

Building a culture of accountability within the team takes discipline and practice. Though quality is everyone's responsibility, each team member is responsible for the task/activity they are performing and the outcome. Make individuals accountable for the deliverables and the final outcome should be responsible of the team. Encouraging new ideas and solutions increase team motivation and feel that their voice and ideas are valuable. Make sure team responsibilities are clearly spelled out. Use tools to manage task progress and set expectations that are always clear.

One great way to empower the team is to encourage peer review for each deliverable and provide feedback (Folkman, 2017). Accountability from a leadership standpoint is setting clear expectations, goals, and deadlines for the team. Divide the big task into granular ones and assign to the person, help them and make them accountable for it and coach them as and when needed behind the scenes.

For example, I was working on an SAP project for one of my Fortune 500 clients. We were tasked with doing data validations on legacy applications that were sending large volumes of direct and indirect procurement data to different interfaces. The problem was the data was so large and it was close to impossible to validate all the data manually within the given release deadlines. Also, no one had a clue on what teams had to be involved in this process, when the data needs to be sent to these interfaces and what data needs to be exactly sent. This led to our UAT cycles always running late beyond the fixed deadlines we had which led to wastage of time, effort and cost. So, I had to solve this problem as the manager of the team.

Data validation is the biggest challenge in an SAP procurement team, where legacy applications are sending large volumes of data each day with a lot of permutations and combinations. No clear direction of what teams are involved and when they are supposed to send the data to through interfaces. The SIT/UAT cycles are always running late due to the complexity of the data load and validation. It was taking a very long time to validate all the data loaded into the system manually. It requires a lot of resources and time to complete the testing cycles.

So first of all, I wanted to set clear expectations on how the SAP system works, what data needs to be sent, at what time to what interfaces. So, I called in my Tech Lead and SAP consultant to take collective accountability to solve this problem. We sat together for half a day and documented everything related to the system in an excel sheet. We put this in a shared folder for the entire team to see at any instant of time to prevent unnecessary confusion.

Next, we had to reduce the manual effort spent on validating all this data. So, I asked my automation engineers to create different automation scripts which ran automatically that validated different data combinations as soon as the data loading process started.

I wanted to have daily updates on this process so I worked with my automation engineers to configure some of the automated processes to run on a nightly basis and by the time we come to office the next morning, all the summary reports are delivered to our Inbox for final audit and confirmation.

This whole process took three months with three of my tech leads and two automation engineers to establish the process and develop the scripts and keep them ready for all upcoming SIT/UAT Testing cycles for various rollouts planned in the Program for next few years.

We saw some great results through this effort. First of all, the team was able to validate test cases with precise data inputs during UAT. We saved 25-30 % of testing time through this effort. This meant that the planned four-week testing cycle was able to be completed within 2.5 to three weeks. We got multiple client appreciation emails because of this.

Also, the reports generated throughout our automated process helped stakeholders make informed decisions to approve the testing cycle and move on to the acceptance and delivery phase. Now we were making strategic decisions based on data instead of assumptions.

Best of all, we reduced eight hours of data validation effort for each interface to 30 mins to one hour. This helped business teams a lot and they could focus their valuable time on other day to day business activities instead of just Testing and validating all the data in the system.

7 Celebrating success

Celebrating small wins at work boosts team morale. You need to send frequent "Thank you" notes and provide monetary gifts to ensure individual contributions are visible. You can also nominate people for internal awards or reward them with more responsibilities.

Remember, always celebrate small wins with the teams and respect different team cultures and background. Acknowledging good behavior is very important. I believe in one mantra we hire good people and provide an environment for them to be great.

As part of celebrating success and recognizing individuals to reward behaviors and performance that support company business goals, we have quarterly awards in different categories in Shining Star, Techno Wiz, Client Centricity, and Innovation and announce them in the all-hands meeting organized quarterly. These employee recognition awards encourage loyalty and engagement within the team, and they feel proud they are working for a product/service which solves customer problems and enhances their experience.

Conclusion

In today’s fast-paced world, focusing on distributed teams in delivering high-value products/services to customers irrespective of their cultural and geographical differences is the key. The above strategies helped me to strengthen the bonding between teams and transparency which translated into great collaboration and a healthy environment created. It helped to deliver the projects on time or ahead of time with great accuracy. The proven techniques discussed above helped build high-performing distributed teams.

By implementing all of the above strategies will help the team to improve overall performance and productivity, which in turn increases the team’s velocity. You need to educate the team on these strategies and clarify if they have any questions and take suggestions if any other good ideas/practices they recommended.

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