

Transcription - Long Distance Project Collaboration

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today our topic is long distance collaboration for projects brought about, initially on my part, by the fact that I have been involved in a long distance collaboration for a project over the past six months, that culminated in an activity that was publicly viewable.

Now the collaboration that I was part of involved a fair bit of creativity in terms of the outcome of the project. I was only collaborating, for the most part, with one other person who was a distance of perhaps five hours drive away from me. A reasonable distance in terms of not being able to quickly jump in a car and find a convenient meeting point halfway between the two. We both had businesses to run ourselves, so time was a critical issue as well. The biggest issue for us was expressing the creativity and the creativity that we had to do as part of that creativity, then we had associated people that needed to have input to the project in terms of supply but that didn't come until very much later in the project. That was probably the biggest issue, the biggest problem area as it turned out.

It wasn't something that we anticipated was going to be a problem at the beginning because it was a government process and we thought that we would just follow the rules and follow the outline of what they produced and we would get the result that we needed to get before the end of the project. When I look at it in terms of review, the issues for us were the communication of creativity and creative activities, then the associated time that we needed to allow for activities where we had a minimum amount of input but we needed the output of that activity as part of our project.

I will share with you my experience in running projects that are long distance. In a nutshell, what worked best for me was not to take too much notice of the fact that they are long distance and use the same principles. So if you had everybody in the same building, you go through what is the project, who should be on the project and what each role is. The most important part is that you include everyone, whether it's at the beginning, middle or end, even if they don't play a part right till the end, include them right from the beginning because they have a lot to contribute. Also then you don't get to the end and then find out whoops we should have gone about it that way. So identify all parties and all stakeholders and have a representative, you can't have everyone. The way to run it throughout the project after setup is to break them up into groups, the way you would if they were all in one room to work on different aspects of the project.

That works really well when it's long distance. They'll talk to each other more. They know that those three people, one might be in the US, one in the UK and one in Australia, they can still work on that and then everybody knows what they're doing and how that fits in with the rest of the team and so on. So, break them up into subgroups and make sure it's all interactive.

The other thing is that is really fantastic these days is that we've got many, many more tools to help us do things online, not face to face, etc. There is a lot of more advanced project management tools, but also software and one of them that comes to mind is called ASANA, I believe. I haven't used it so I can't speak for it, but I believe that sort of software will transcribe

everything that's recorded on their interactions and it happens almost instantaneously. Now, obstacles will come up always. So as the subgroup A is working on item two and they have a challenge or obstacle, whatever you like to call it, that's flagged to the rest of the team and the rest of the team will say, I don't know, but somebody I know would, you know, have been through it before and here's my thoughts on it.

Having done both, having done the long distance and the localised projects, is one easier to manage than the other?

Yes and no. I think sometimes with the ones that are local, you think it would be easier because you think I'll see these people all the time. What I find when they are more remote and distanced, they keep to the timeline a lot better, more structured, the management of their activity. You have to organise a time that suits people because it might be different countries, different states, different time zones, so people make a better effort, if you like. You can be more structured about who's doing what, the responsibilities across the board.

I guess for this most recent project because it's top of mind for me at the moment, is that we made a whole lot of mistakes in terms of the management of it. We didn't really talk about who's responsible for what. We didn't look at how long the project was going to take, only that we knew we had a particular end date where it had to be done by. We certainly didn't do what Fulyana was just talking about. We didn't involve everyone right from the start. We left some of it to right at the end which was a problematic at the time and was able to be overcome because we were able to present the people involved with the deadline and say, "Well, we need it by this date and you're in for this and we've done everything else." That was probably muddled somewhat by the fact that we got a lot of different information about what we had to do for that final process. Even people who were involved in that activity, who were also remote from where we were, all gave us different opinions as it turned out, about what had to be done, because there was nothing written down about what actually should be done.

I guess that's another area of concern when you're managing and co-ordinating those long distance collaborations. Does everybody understand what the process is? Do we know what the process is definitively? Does everyone understand it?

I agree. But it can also be used by some people as an obstacle for the sake of it. So for example, when you're across states or country, it might come up with an issue that says, "Well, this won't work here because..." The answer to that is, what is it? Does it have to be slightly different for one state or one country?

Is that a compliance, a legal matter? And that's why it's very important to have people from compliance involved either 100% or throughout the project, somebody from legal, etc. You don't just call them in at one point, they can see the full thread of what's happening. That involvement can be in more than one way. I believe in a cross-functional project teams. You have every area, whether it's operation, sales, marketing, you know, the whole lot, so we get the outcome as it should be, not missing anything.

We tend to the project, now we're at the project presentation time. The remote long distance people have been brought together as the project team for the final preparation of the presentation of the project. This was the case for me, there was a difference in our interpretation which only became apparent once we were physically in the same room and

looked at what we were going to present as part of the project result. Then it became about almost starting the project again with the structure of what we had already done. This is the material we've got, what are we going to do with it now to provide this outcome that we have to present in two days time.

The negotiation that happens at that point and the readjusting of the project is interesting and could be potentially an area of concern. But in this case it wasn't. We actually worked through what we had to do and what resources we had in front of us and what the outcome was going to be. We brought in, at that point, a few little extra outside resources that we could get hold of in the short space of time, and incorporated those into it. When it then got to project presentation day that was fine. This was a physical issue, the transportation of the project product was problematic and it got damaged on the way to the project presentation. Then it became a matter of, we've got five hours to get this ready for the public to see, what can we do at this point in time, to fix it. We adjusted as we went a lot of the way. You really need to make sure that the communication within the team is good because they've come together for this very intense period of time, after a long period of time of long distance communication.

Do we need to make sure that the communication under pressure is as good as it has been when it's not been under pressure?

For my part there was a change in the communication at that point and the person that I had been working with all this time, I thought we were working along the same lines, she suddenly became very concerned that I would be distressed at the changes that we had to make at that point and then because I wasn't talking, which is actually my way when we're doing these things, I don't talk much, I actually do the stuff and then I'll talk about it afterwards, she didn't know that and so she thought because I got quiet that there was a problem, that I was concerned, I was upset or I was distressed or whatever it was. She was strong enough to say, are you all right with this? Is this okay? And then I realised that it was because I wasn't talking. So in that sense we had a good working relationship but that could be an issue where, if you don't know the long distance collaborator all that well, then you need to re-establish what the communication lines are and what the communication style will be when the situation changes from the collaboration to the presentation.

Later on, when this work had been on display for a few days, there were issues with the stability of it and the physical stability of it and then we had some people who came past and decided they wanted to souvenir some of it and that meant it fell over completely and we had to adjust to that. All of the emotional turmoil of that intense period of time when we actually did come together having had such a long period of time where there was not a whole lot of emotion happening in the collaboration.

I know the situation you're talking about and I think you couldn't have done it any differently. What I like about what you experienced is the way that you reacted to those unforeseen things that do happen in all projects. At the end of the day you've done stuff and then they don't go to plan but you knew how to recover and how you recovered still with the high integrity of the project and the communication under pressure. In some cases that's all you can do. In other cases, in most other projects you understand each other's style. There is plenty of opportunity to use face communication remotely now, so there's no excuse about getting to know people.

The other thing is if you did a project and the final presentation is at the end of the month, I normally try and make sure that we are prepared at least two weeks, if not a month beforehand and do a dry run. In other words, you do the presentation but not just within the team, you invite key stakeholders, just a couple, and you say, this is, if you like, a draft, a dry run and I'll give you the opportunity to look at anything missing, anything you should add, anything that can enhance it, within the terms of the project. If you do that then you have even a bit of what you needed to have it done and picking your presenters is key. It doesn't have to be the project manager and it doesn't have to be one person. As I mentioned, you break them up into groups, subgroups. Maybe there are things to have it subgrouped with their bit and always always test your product. In other words, if you're presenting software, make sure it's working, even the prototype or whatever it is, as the dry run and the day of presentation. Always be prepared for it not to work for any sorts of reasons or for the resources to not be available at the time that you need them to be available. You just need to have that backup plan as well

I think that along with all of that, the review afterwards is just as important because what my collaborators and I have gone through is a review, a post project presentation review. We can see what worked for us as individuals and as a team and what we needed to have paid more attention to and as a review of that activity, which is an ongoing activity, it happens every three years, we now have information that we can pass on to the next people who do it, which again will probably be a long distance collaboration. We can say this is what worked for us, this is what we needed to look out for, these are the things that you need to be aware of in terms of the actual physical project itself. Let someone else benefit from that experience because otherwise it's wasted if you just do the project and you live with the consequences of it. It's only half finished in my view.

Agree. The other thing is all projects obviously have a project manager. The sponsor is key. You have to have a sponsor and usually it's got to be someone who has a lot of influence in the organization, CEO one down etc. When you're doing long distance, I think it might sound like an overkill, but it really does make a big difference if you have an in country or state sponsor because there will be times where people have to work more or less or change from business as usual to put more time in the project etc. You want someone there that will make things happen. I find that if you have your overall sponsor, country based or state based, whatever your project spread is, it makes a difference and people will know there's a lot of effort, time and appetite for that project, so they support it.

It's interesting because that, in my mind, brings up a whole other conversation that we're going to have because we did have a couple of "sponsors" and our reaction to that was that we actually didn't want their input because we wanted to prove something to them, that we can do it.

So this is very bad, I won't talk about it now. It's okay that you mentioned it, just don't do it.

Thank you for your attendance today. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.