

We used this week to debrief the discussion in your Blog. The following was the assignment, to which the students responded in the Blackboard discussion forum:

*What is one thing you **learned** (through the discussion) that helped clarify what you had read or what you thought before exploring this topic?*

*What is one thing you either **agreed** or **disagreed** with that you read in the blog discussion or in the book?*

*What is one **burning question** or issue that you still have related to either project teams vs. communities of practice, or the use of technology to enable project teams/communities?*

Theme: COP vs. Project Team

“I equate the difference between the two to be similar to the difference between objective descriptions and subjective descriptions. One is discreet, more formal, and the other has the potential to go deeper in to the subject, but really has no defined boundaries.”

“Why can't the project be the community? I would think a start-up company most closely fits this. The very fabric of the project/company is made up of like-minded individuals, all working toward the same goal, often very passionately. The author discussed how they are different, how they are similar, but not how they could be one and same.”

As we continued to discuss the differences, there was an increasing amount of energy directed toward insisting that projects and communities were the same. I eventually decided that what they really wanted to be able to do was take the spirit of community into their project teams:

“Maybe having a way of controlling the direction of the project (might) be the difference. It would be great to create an atmosphere where everyone is relaxed and having their say and encouraged to be participative.”

Very early in the discussion, the energy turned toward the use of technology for project team collaboration. The following are some of the themes of that discussion.

Technology Use / Literacy

“I think that by "association" alone, we come to learn how to use the technologies around us. . . . I think that if we have a "need" to utilize various technology forms, then we will make the effort to learn, especially if we are in a workplace setting/environment.”

“The best technologies are those that are amenable to the uses that people care about.”

“In my mind, tech savvy is about three things: personal preference, exposure to tech, and economic status. If you want to listen to music on an iPod, then you have to know how to buy one, hook it up to your computer, download and catalogue music, and of course be able to afford the equipment in the first place. These are all barriers to entry that we should not take for granted.”

“John posted a quote from one of the other authors of our text, Nancy White, that stated “Technology is used collectively but experienced individually”. I really connected with that statement because I am one who is new to using technology and usually late jumping on bandwagons. So I feel that the more time I spend in teams the more knowledge and

experience we gain not only in the area the project is related to but the technology surrounding it.”

Theme: Generational gap – fact or fiction?

Most students agreed that the generational gap is less fact than fiction, with many examples from their lives of older people who are adopting technology just fine. However, there were still opinions on both sides of this issue.

“However, I find that the older I get, the less likely I am to jump on bandwagons (of any kind). Why? Maybe because I have seen so much change. I am always on the alert for fads that won't stick. I don't have time for them. When something establishes its usefulness to me and I become confident that it won't be replaced by something even more useful tomorrow, I am more likely to consider devoting my time and energy into integrating it into my life. It is not fear of change, or fear of technology that (necessarily) slows people down in adopting new things as they age. But it might be reluctance to waste time and energy on something that is still changing fast. Somehow, that rapid change and learning is more attractive to us when we are younger I think.”

Theme: How are companies dealing with digital habitats?

At some point in the discussion, one student tried to take us down the path of comparing how companies are using technologies. This disintegrated pretty quickly into the f2f vs. tech discussion below. Here is how I responded to the question.

(From Kathy) “On your burning question, "how are companies coping with digital habitats" - I hate answers like this, but in this case "it depends" is the only thing I can say. This is not so different than my response to the generational issue. It really gets to the culture of the company. Is this a company that values rapid change and adoption of new ideas (maybe a young company, or a start-up)? If so, you can bet that they are on the leading edge of tech adoption. Is it a company that is well established, mature, and in an industry that values stability and quality? If so, you can bet they will do their research, select a suite of tools, provide access, training and support to everyone, and then stay on a stable track while resisting lots of new, upstart tools that are "cool" or even more highly functional than what they had last year.

And a great question from a student that I didn't have an answer to (except to tell her that it sounded like a good research topic!):

“But what I don't have an answer for is how technology can be chosen based on cultures. How is one to go about researching IT solutions in foreign cultures? What is allowed/not allowed? Effective/not effective? The methodology of researching across cultural lines is missing for me.”

Theme: F2F vs. tech

There was a lot of debate on the merits of F2F versus technology mediated communication and collaboration. Here are a couple of snippets from that discussion. Probably nothing you haven't heard before.

“. . . tell me something . . . whatever (the F2F) replacement is, does it need to have some component of live/real-time audio? You can't truly discuss things through your fingers.”

“Perfect example, Office Communicator. They use it all day long in IT to get quick answers. At my previous job it would pop up each day and we would all say 'how do we get that annoying window to stop coming up?' Being in the lab we had no use for it as we were either never at computers or sitting right next to the person we needed anyway. Now in IT I see the value of that annoying window. So the use of technology is situational and needs based from what I have experienced.”

Theme: Technology adoption and change

I was pleased to see a few students begin to struggle with their role as “change agents” – often used to describe the major charge to a project manager. My answer follows these two sample posts from students.

“I am still confronted with a moral dilemma regarding technology adoption. I wonder if it is better to allow the people to choose the technology, or to deliver it to them and provide training. While some students in our course have commented on mandated tech adoption causing painful transitions, I can't help but think that one must address business concerns first, and then help people adjust. If we are to choose tools based on the desire of individuals, and expect consent from all parties, we will likely never choose anything. “

“. . . my burning question is: does wanting to mandate something to avoid lengthy and potential conflict make me a bad project manager? In this instance, is it better to put the company first and ensure the support systems are in place to let the people figure it out?”

(From Kathy) . . . “This is all about change. Should you select the direction and the influence people to follow, or should you have everyone contribute, knowing that they all have opinions and someone needs to make a choice?”

I would encourage you to mandate only after soliciting input. Sometimes (especially with things like technology) the mandate is already there, from your corporate IT department. If that is the case, your job becomes one of making sure everyone understands that, they understand why, and that they have the training/resources/support to use the technology.

Sometimes there is no corporate mandate. In that case, I would encourage you to set aside some time to clearly introduce the problem that needs to be solved with technology, and then solicit input. Include your IT contact so that you are getting input on what will actually work in your environment. Make a choice as the leader, and then clearly communicate to the team why you made the choice that you did.

I think good project "leaders" begin by assessing the situation, listening to stakeholders (including their project team members), then they firmly make decisions, take responsibility for those decisions, and make sure to communicate and support the team as the decision is implemented. So, mandates don't make you a bad project managers. The key is in the steps you took before you decided on the mandate, as well as how you carry it out.”

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