

How to Succeed in the Matrix **Our View by Jackson Jackson & Wagner**

Overall success in a matrix organizational structure depends largely on the presence of constant, clear communication. From the very beginning, all aspects of the matrix process -- from roles & responsibilities to the evaluation process -- need to be clearly defined and managed with open communication and unambiguous accountability. But what if they aren't established or working properly?

Many organizations assume the effectiveness of operating a matrix structure lies with the human resources department. In most organizations, communication professionals do not set up the matrix structure -- that is usually the purview of human resources. However, it is the skill set of the communication professional that can help the matrix structure function effectively and ensure its success.

Those who have lived in a matrix structure easily can point out pros and cons:

- An employee will have at least two different bosses in a matrix organization...one that directs functional responsibilities where there is a "solid line" reporting relationship, and another that oversees a different function or division to which the employee has a "dotted line" relationship. Hopefully, both bosses will be pulling in the same direction toward organizational goals.
- An employee will have contact with members of other functional areas via their participation on project teams, thus diminishing "silos" so common in traditional organizations. This can lead to better lateral communication and an opportunity for employees to broaden their skill sets.
- Global businesses point out that the matrix approach positions them to be more nimble and responsive to customer needs, with problems and solutions considered from multiple areas of expertise.
- However, an employee too often gets caught in the middle with different priorities and direction from their bosses --this could be due to a lack of good lateral communication systems, personality conflicts or power struggles. There might be one boss sharing information that is positioned as confidential within the business unit, or perhaps deadlines and priorities imposed that conflict between areas. The employee then becomes responsible for negotiating details with their second boss -- often leading to frustration and confusion which can be detrimental to overall corporate goals.

A communications professional, utilizing their core skills, can be useful in the following ways:

- Coaching and mentoring the employee "caught in the middle" by helping to figure out where the conflicts lie and how the particular situation might be improved to benefit all involved. The communications professional will bring to the table the ability to ask questions that identify issues, help an employee with negotiation skills and train them on methods for bridging differences.

- Facilitating conversations between all parties that lead to clarity around roles and responsibilities. If the employee has a clear understanding of what their responsibilities are and what boss they should go to/defer to in a variety of situations, there will be less conflict and more productivity in achieving goals. Communication professionals can utilize their skills in facilitation, research, and strategic planning to help create organizational clarity.

- Establishing or refining the evaluation process. Some organizations have both bosses involved in the evaluation; others do a 360 review that includes input from bosses, employees and co-workers; and still others defer to the primary, or solid line boss, for their review. The communication professional, using their research expertise and experience can help clarify not only the process, but the actual goals against which the employee will be measured. This will result in employees that are more focused on the priority activities that will help them achieve positive outcomes.

- Dealing with conflict – those uncomfortable conversations. Communication professionals can be helpful by providing training that will allow for real-life role play situations and techniques for handling different personalities in their work groups. The communication professional can use a project's completion—or even a mid-course check -- to evaluate process and gain input and reflection from team members on what worked well and what could be improved going forward.

- Creating an environment of trust in the workplace. Establishing and maintaining trust in members of the matrix team is critical for a successful outcome, no matter the goals -- short term or long term. There are many variables to consider when examining the level of trust in an organization, including the leadership styles of management and the culture of the organization... is it a place that looks to employees at all levels for feedback, or is it a chain-of-command, knowledge is power environment? Is there fear of retribution when truthful feedback occurs? A communication professional with organization development experience can identify barriers to creating an effective and productive workplace and facilitate open discussion and training on the issues that need to be addressed. Senior leadership is the place to start, as the organizational tone is set at the top.

The matrix structure is used in many workplaces. Employees in these organizations will struggle, and often fail, with the push and pull of serving two masters if tools and assistance are not in place to assist with issues that arise.

By using the proven skills of professionals trained in opening up lines of communication and finding common ground, employees can succeed in achieving the goals that will help make the entire organization successful.

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