

Notes on a “Project SWAT” or “Project Coaching Team” Support Approach

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1) WHAT is SWAT?

The Project SWAT or Project Coaching Team concept is a team composed of experienced individuals that, on a part time basis, support project teams during critical project phases or when challenging project conditions exist. SWAT team members are composed of experienced PMs and other disciplines needed to advise and support projects in both project management and in the actual work the project performs. The team is intended to increase the probability of project success through advice, facilitation and decision support actions. The team does not “take over” the project, the team advises the project. The support team does not do the work for the project team but supports the team in doing so. Typically the SWAT does not work on all projects and only works on selected projects which may be strategic and/or risky. Usually senior leadership will assign the SWAT to selected projects based on organization needs, priorities and concerns.

2) WHY SWAT?

The SWAT approach to project support was defined and implemented for a number of reasons.

- All PMs are not experts in all areas of project management and a support function can be critical to ensure all basic PM functions are sufficiently performed on a given project.
- All PMs may not be experts in all project work areas and may benefit from related support.
- Projects typically get into trouble right at the start and this is where the SWAT function can work to remove many risks generated at startup, increasing the probability of project success.
- Projects that are now in trouble often need outside views and support as the project in trouble often has exhausted solutions and maybe in “mind lock” and need fresh new ideas. Troubled projects may also lack needed skills to handle a problem. Troubled projects can benefit from more “minds and hands” working to put the project back on a successful track.
- Sometimes projects that need help do not ask for it as PMs may feel it is their job to handle all the details. Some issues are beyond the PM’s “sphere of control” and when a SWAT engagement is active, the SWAT will often surface needed support and can work, with the PM’s concurrence, with leadership to obtain needed external support. Examples here are

resource contentions, customer interface issues and help with managing an external subcontractor.

- In addition to the above reasons, indirect advantages exist for a SWAT function.
 - The organization not only benefits from more successful projects, but the organization is advantaged by the fact that the SWAT approach will generate significant lessons learned and best practices that can be captured and applied on other projects, now and in the future.
 - The SWAT member’s own experience is an “accelerated skills growth” due to the “compressed experience” gained from working on many projects in a short timeframe. A given PM might work on a small number of projects each year where SWAT members may work on a dozen or more projects in the same time period. This concentrated exposure to project issues and solutions advances the SWAT member skill sets and the organization experience base much faster than when compared to an organization not employing such an approach.
 - A SWAT assignment as a lead or as a SWAT member can be a good way to grow new leaders in the organization.

3) HOW IS SWAT ENGAGED ON A PROJECT?

Each organization would develop a unique SWAT engagement process to match organization needs and structure. Follows is a generic version of engagement steps. Overlap and iteration of these steps is common in real practice.

Use the following generic process to form a process best suited to your environment.

- Leadership identifies a project for SWAT support where such a project might be:
 - A strategic new project
 - A risky new project
 - An important current project that is in trouble
 - A current project that is not in trouble but indications are that it likely will be and proactive action is warranted
 - A project with a junior PM where SWAT support (which could be limited in nature) would be of value in growing that new PM’s skill set
 - (Note that in my experience, the SWAT resources were usually stretched thin and the team applications were limited to new high risk strategic projects just starting and very important projects in real trouble)
- In addition to leadership designated projects for SWAT support, a PM might request support for any reason.
- A leader of the SWAT is identified. (Note: Where a broad SWAT function is in place and multiple SWAT leads exist, a SWAT lead is identified that has skills best aligned with the needs of the respective project.)
- The project team is introduced to the SWAT concept, the reason for SWAT engagement and to the selected SWAT lead.
- The SWAT lead works with the PM to understand the basic nature of the project. The SWAT lead may use a “Discovery Survey” or “SWAT Engagement Checklist” to capture key information about the project. (Note that any survey or checklist is typically going to be part

- generic and part organization unique. A generic “Discovery Survey” can be found on www.manageprojectsbetter.com under “Assessments.”)
- Using the information gathered, the SWAT lead identifies top project needs.
 - The SWAT lead would validate these needs with the PM and make any adjustments necessary to fully support the project’s situation.
 - The SWAT lead would define a set of needed actions for the project to meet all or the most important needs. Example actions might include working to finalize project requirements, definition of the project deliverable, preparation of the project plan, etc.
 - The SWAT lead reviews the potential support actions including some information on how the SWAT support will be provided for those actions with the PM and makes needed refinements as they both agree. Adjustments to the planned SWAT support work scope are made so that it becomes the “right approach” for the project in the opinion of all involved, especially the PM. PM ownership and agreement is critical as the PM is responsible for the project, will be actively involved in the actions and will be left with the project after the SWAT leaves.
 - Specific “SWAT Exit Criteria” is defined and accepted by all parties where that can be defined. Where the exit criteria is not easy to define, exit criteria can be defined as support efforts progress and more is known about what will be done. Exit criteria is usually defined for each planned SWAT action. As an example if one planned SWAT action is to support completion of the project plan, the completion of that plan is the exit criteria.
 - The SWAT lead would identify what supporting SWAT team members are needed. On small efforts, the SWAT lead may perform all needed support work. In many cases the SWAT lead will assemble a SWAT team to provide the defined support actions. Each SWAT team member may support the project in varying levels of engagement depending on what is needed. SWAT members typically represent the disciplines needed to guide the SWAT actions identified. As an example, if the project needed help with the project requirements, an individual with that expertise would be included in the SWAT. As another example, if the project needed advice on generating contracts for subcontractors, a SWAT member with that expertise would be included.
 - For strategic projects, the resulting SWAT engagement approach might be reviewed with leadership for awareness and/or approval and/or adjustments.
 - The SWAT planned actions are executed. The planned engagement actions are often modified as progress is made as all parties understand more of what is needed and/or when better resolution actions are found. The SWAT exit criteria may also be adjusted at the agreement of both the PM and SWAT lead to best meet the needs of the project.
 - In all cases and at all times, the PM is and remains accountable and responsible for the project, the SWAT is there for advice and for support only.
 - In all cases and at all times, the PM and project team perform the project work, not the SWAT. The SWAT commonly is directly involved in project management work (examples are project initiation, planning, risk management, etc.) and in the project work but the project team completes the work with SWAT advice and assistance.
 - Where any disagreements between the advice provided by the SWAT and what the PM sees as needed exist, it becomes the responsibility of these two parties to resolve. The PM needs to have the final say as the PM is accountable for the project. (Note that such disagreements were not common in my experience and where disagreements existed, the PM and SWAT lead were usually able to work out a productive compromise.)

- At the conclusion of the SWAT engagement, the SWAT lead and the PM should briefly meet and generate a set of bullets on what was done and what was good and not so good to form the basis for ongoing SWAT improvements. These summary notes can be included in a “SWAT Engagement Summary” addressed below.
- The SWAT lead assembles a summary report for the SWAT engagement that can include:
 - The initial reasons for SWAT engagement
 - The initial assessment of project need
 - The initial planned support actions
 - What happened and how things turned out
 - What should be done different in the future

Such a report can be valuable to increase the effectiveness of future SWAT engagements especially in situations where the set of SWAT members is a rotating set of individuals. The report may or may not be shared with leadership. Typically for very strategic projects, leadership will want to understand what the SWAT did to further support project success.

4) HOW IS A SWAT CAPABILITY DEVELOPED?

Steps to develop a SWAT capability will vary from organization to organization.

Steps could include the following:

- A concept of **what** the SWAT is for the respective organization is developed (see this document paragraph #1 for ideas) along with what the SWAT will address and will not address
- **Why** the SWAT is of value to the organization is defined (see paragraph #2 for ideas); linking the SWAT concept to meeting and maintaining the organization’s mission and vision are important
- A few ideas of **how** the SWAT would operate are defined to support stakeholder understanding of the concept (see paragraph #3 for ideas)
- A pilot SWAT implementation approach is recommended to leadership
- Some draft operating details are defined for the SWAT pilot such as:
 - Definition of disciplines and individuals available for part time SWAT assignments
 - Boundaries of SWAT operation, including support inclusions and exclusions (examples scheduling only, or all PM areas support, or PM and technical work support, etc.)
 - Identification of a SWAT sponsor or exec of interest
 - General SWAT role vs PM role (SWAT role is guidance not “doing”)
 - Draft checklist for the SWAT lead to assess project conditions (See “Discovery Survey”)
- Projects for pilot SWAT engagements are identified, usually these should be projects that are starting, are not in serious trouble and are open to the support concept
- Pilot SWAT engagements are performed with both the project team and the SWAT maintaining a full awareness that this is a trail effort and that adjustments will be made as more is learned about how to make this approach best fit the organization
- Lessons learned are captured to refine the SWAT approach
- A revised SWAT concept is defined based on the pilot engagements, recommendations from the respective project teams and any input from the SWAT Sponsor and/or leadership
- For a broad SWAT implementation, a set of “SWAT Operating Infrastructure and Implementation Details” can be of real value and could include the following. One does not

put all of this in place right away and one does not want to add too much bureaucracy, but some basic guidance does need to exist to make the approach effective and repeatable.

- Definition of the types of individuals that will be SWAT leads and SWAT members
- Implementation details including a decision for full time or part time SWAT team membership, funding vehicles, Sponsor role, etc.
- Engagement process (introductions, survey, needs definition, actions development, review with PM, etc.)
- SWAT lead role and SWAT member role definitions
- SWAT lead role relative to the PM role
- Role of SWAT sponsor during SWAT engagement
- Process for project selection for SWAT support
- SWAT tools in the form of templates and checklists such as the “Discovery Survey” for SWAT work (note that these tools are not project management tools but are tools used by the SWAT team to perform the SWAT function)
- Examples or guidance on SWAT exit criteria
- Process for SWAT exit such as report, post-mortem and any post exit actions

5) ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- All parts of the SWAT deployment must be accomplished in a highly professional and constructive manner with all work and decisions being focused on what is best for the project, the organization and the project’s customer. Where any politics, personal agendas or other priorities come into play, the effectiveness of the SWAT approach can be compromised and may even result in a net negative impact. SWAT leads need to be selected with this needed condition in mind. Leadership needs to set the right “tone” for the SWAT implementation right at the start and communicate these thoughts as things progress.
- The use of a pilot SWAT implementation is important to refine the approach to best match organization needs, to gain acceptance and to align the overall approach with the organization’s culture and environment.
- Some PMs and teams may not initially support the implementation of a SWAT function as some may feel this is an intrusion into the project team’s responsibilities. My experience has been that as the SWAT implementation matures, more and more support surfaces for this idea as a clear need and value becomes more apparent. Some PMs have said “I was unsure this was of value, but afterwards there was clear evidence that some critical advice was provided that kept us away from some real issues. I would recommend this approach to other projects.”
- Management support, both initially and in the long term, is key to the success of this approach. A SWAT exec of interest or SWAT sponsor that believes this is a good approach is key.
- The SWAT team should be tasked with the collection of project team comments both good and not. The SWAT team should work continuously to make improvements in their operating methods and make periodic (example quarterly) reports to senior leadership on what improvements they have made.

Notes on a “Project SWAT” or “Project Coaching Team” Support Approach

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- The timing of a SWAT implementation can happen anytime but if a recent project issue exists that could have been avoided; this may be a good time to garner support for a SWAT implementation.
- It is usually best to start small and slow and refine the approach. If too much is attempted too quickly, too many mistakes may happen that can kill the entire idea.

*For Questions or Advice on Implementing a SWAT Function in Your Organization
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