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2. Peer to Peer (P2P) Learning Model: Unique Way to Educate Management & Leadership Knowledge and Skills by Working on Various Real-life Projects Together with Companies

Introduction

Mission is to act and react when for example, members of the project team changes or a customer wants to make modifications to a project assignment³⁰. With these kinds of changes a project manager has to stop for a moment to think what he has to decide, what the choices are and how different choices are going to affect the progress and outcome of the project. Decision making has to be quite quickly, because unfinished tasks and the time schedule are not going to wait. In the most difficult situations the project manager should always discuss with his project team and also ask advice from older colleagues. Less experienced project managers should accept all offered help and advice, because the final responsibility for the project always belongs to the project manager³¹.

Team work is also at the centre stage of a project. The project team is based on a group of people. The size of the project team can vary notably. Every person in a project team has their own role, tasks and responsibilities. The ability to work in a team is unquestionable in order to complete a project successfully, also every team member responds to their own tasks and ensures that those tasks are done carefully and according to the schedule³².

It is also wrong to assume that projects are only used in the business world and in big government agencies. This explains that projects can be utilized anywhere. And because of that there are many different types of projects. These

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³⁰ Työterveyslaitos: projektityö muuttaa työnteon vakiintuneita tapoja, www.superliitto.fi/viestinta/uutiset/tyoterveyslaitos-projektityo-muuttaa-tyonteon-vakiintuneita-tapoja/ [9.2.2015]

³¹ S. Kettunen, *Onnistu projektissa*, WSOY, Helsinki 2009, p. 157.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

can be, for example, company internal development projects or a charity event developed by a community³³.

In general, the organization is running several projects at the same time. This means that new projects can already be defined or planned before the former project has been completed, also the same individuals can be working on different projects. For example, the same person can be a project manager in two or more projects at the same time³⁴.

Project Management

Project management starts with planning. Creating a project plan is not easy, but it needs to be done carefully. Without a project plan there is no project, because there are so many tasks and things to consider. By doing a specific project plan it is easier for the project manager to keep all parts of the project in order. The project plan answers to simple questions like what needs to be done and why, how it will be done, who will do it, by when it must be done and what resources are needed to execute the plan³⁵.

Joseph Heagney³⁶ points out that before a project team can do any work it must have a consensus of the project's meaning. This will answer the question why. The project manager needs to define the project's mission, vision and objectives with the team, without doing this the project might fail at the beginning. Richard Newton³⁷ adds that it is vital to also define the project's scope at the beginning, a clear scope helps to define the resources needed and helps to understand the project better. It helps the planning when one knows what is in the project and what is not. When the question why is answered, the project manager starts to plan with the project team answers what and how. Objectives must be divided into smaller and smaller components. When this is done the project manager has detailed actions to achieve the objectives. Project planning has answered the questions what and how³⁸.

When tasks are in practicable forms the project manager identifies the resources needed to execute them. The main questions are who or what are needed and how much. For every task there needs to be a person in charge. The next step is to make a schedule for the tasks, scheduling is one of the most critical things in project management. Usually the project's ending has already been determined, so the timescale is known. What has to be done is to estimate and determine the time needed for different tasks. At this point the project manager

³³ P. Virtanen, *Projekti strategian toteuttajana*, Tietosanoma Oy, Helsinki 2009, pp. 20-27.

³⁴ S. Kettunen, *Onnistu... opus citatum*, p. 157.

³⁵ J. Heagney, *Fundamentals of project management*, American Management Association, New York 2012, p. 36.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

³⁷ R. Newton, *The project management book*, Harlow, Pearson 2013, p. 29.

³⁸ *Ibidem*. p. 33.

needs to make sure that all the resources needed are available at the time. If tasks are arranged in a meaningful hierarchy they are easier to schedule. Then the project manager can see what needs to be done and in which order, because usually tasks are related. There are also different kinds of scheduling tools to use to help the scheduling, but nothing can be scheduled if the project manager doesn't estimate the amount of work and time needed for the task. The main thing is to make a realistic schedule. The question when is answered³⁹.

Even though the project plan is made carefully, changes might happen. While planning the project, one must be prepared to plan it again. Too detailed planning is a waste of time, because if necessary changes take place, one must plan it all from the beginning again. Changes might impact, for example the project's schedule, budget or scope. That is why changes have to be measured carefully and think if it is possible to execute them. If changes are made, they have to be updated to the project plan. Because the possibility for changes is high, a part of project management is to make risk analysis. It consists of identifying risks, analyzing their possibility and meaning for the project and making a Plan B. Not every risk should be considered, just those likely to happen and which have a clear impact for example the schedule, budget or quality. By having a Plan B, it is easy just to change from A to B if necessary⁴⁰.

The project manager's most important job is to ensure that the project is heading towards and reaches its goal. The project manager's daily work consists of controlling, supervising, solving problems, dealing with changes and risks, instructing the team, documentation, communication, decision making, taking control etc. Two of the most important tasks are supervising and controlling. By supervising a project manager assesses if the project is heading towards its goals as planned. Controlling is to make sure that resources are used to achieve the critical goals. With these actions the project manager makes sure that everything is done within the scope of the project, is documented, matches the standards and everything is done on schedule⁴¹. With evaluating the project continuously the project manager makes sure that the work is acceptable and meets the objectives. Evaluation helps the project manager make decisions considering the project's process and helps to find out what is needed to be done differently in the future⁴².

Project Leadership

The project manager's job is not all about scheduling and controlling things. The main purpose is to lead the project team and lead the human side of things. The project manager's general task is to make people want to work for the goals

³⁹ Ibidem. p. 41.

⁴⁰ J. Heagney, *Fundamentals of...*, opus citatum, pp. 41-42.

⁴¹ R. Newton, *The project...*, opus citatum, p. 80-81.

⁴² J. Heagney, *Fundamentals of...*, opus citatum, pp. 112-119.

and not having to supervise them all the time. The project manager should learn, besides management skills, leadership skills to make the project team a high-performance project team⁴³.

It all starts with creating team culture. By listening to team members a project leader collects information of how they work and what are they like. The project manager creates a team culture where everyone feels comfortable⁴⁴. Team members need to feel they are part of the project and they want to help the project manager to achieve the project's goals. This requires that the project's goals and objectives and duties and responsibilities are clear to everyone in the team. Making the project a joint responsibility for everyone means that all achievements and problems are shared. Making the project team a part of planning the project helps in that⁴⁵.

Motivation is an important thing, a motivated person does a better job with higher quality. They are more spontaneous, responsible, self-contained and creative. Motivation leads to enthusiasm and commitment. These are features necessary while working on a project. People can be motivated in many ways, some ways work better with some and others appreciate different things. Delegating responsibility makes work meaningful. By giving tasks where a team member can challenge himself and improve his skills raises motivation. Thanking people for a good job and giving them fair feedback are good ways to impact motivation⁴⁶.

There are countless leadership skills to use in daily work. The project manager needs to be precise and demand high standards. To motivate the team for that, the team leader should himself do as he expects others to. The project manager needs to be an example, he needs to trust his team members and let them work as they want within the scope and schedule. Conflicts must be solved and the project team must not fear them. Everyone should have the ability to voice their opinion and those should be discussed in a good spirit. Team issues should be solved like any other problems with a professional touch. A good project manager uses leadership skills wisely and chooses the best methods for his team⁴⁷.

Peer to Peer (P2P) Learning Model

Laurea introduced the Peer to Peer (P2P) Degree Programme of Business Management in 2008. P2P is based on Laurea's educational philosophy "Learning by Developing" (LbD)⁴⁸. LbD is a mixture of a research-oriented, expansive and problem-based, as well as, constructive learning. The starting point of the P2P learning model is that the learning environment consists of an authentic

⁴³ R. Newton, *The project... opus citatum*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ V. Moisalo, *Arjen johtaminen: Käytännön esimiestyötä*, Infor, Helsinki 2010, pp. 34–37.

⁴⁵ R. Newton, *The project... opus citatum*, p. 56.

⁴⁶ J. Kontiainen, A. Skyttä, *Esimiehen mielityö: prosessoivan johtamisen opas*, Innotiimi, Vantaa 2010, pp. 39-42.

⁴⁷ R. Newton, *The project... opus citatum*, pp. 57-58.

⁴⁸ K. Raji, *Learning by developing in higher education*, Espoo 2014, pp. 10-14.

development project connected to working life. Students, lecturers, and co-operation partners from working life collaborate and generate new knowledge. The students' learning is directly linked to these development projects from the very beginning of their business studies. In this unique programme there are no lectures or exams, instead the students work in teams to solve business problems. The lecturers' main role is to supervise and support the students in their development projects. The goal is however, to let the students become more independent during their studies and to raise future professionals that will not hesitate to start identifying and solving problems they face⁴⁹.

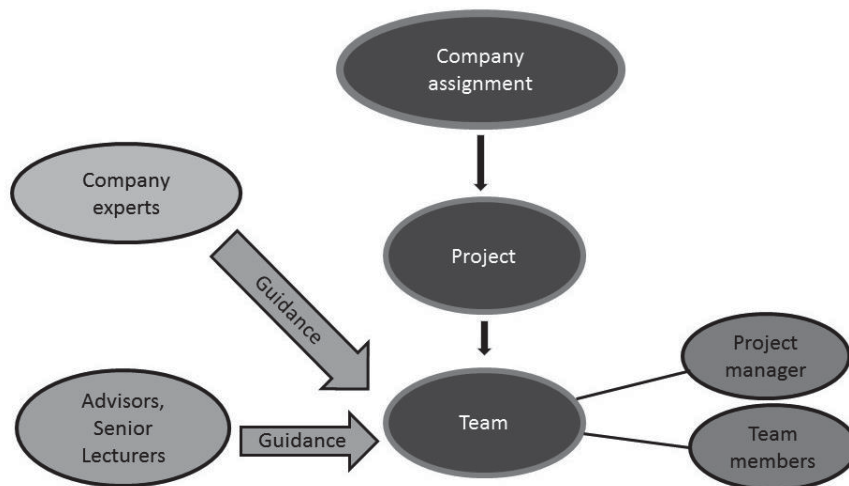


Fig. 2.1. Working structure in the P2P learning model.

Source: P. Airaksinen, *Laurea Peer to Peer Operating Model*, 2015.

The P2P learning model requires a flexible curriculum and a variety of projects. The curriculum (total 210 ECTS) includes five core competence modules (150 ECTS) which are Business and Entrepreneurship, Development of Business and Entrepreneurship, Practical Training, Development Specialist and Innovator and one module which is based on the core of each Laurea campus. Complementary studies (60 ECTS) consist of a minimum 15 ECTS modules which can be any kind. Students design their study plan themselves based on a vision of their future career plan. Project selection is based on the modules. Students are also supported by the tutoring of lecturers. The basic project extension is 15 ECTS. Each student

⁴⁹ P. Dickinson, P. Haavisto, *P2P educational model an example of innovative learning linking technology, business and research*, [in:] *Educating for the future. Proceedings of the ATEE 38th Annual Conference*, [ed.] E. Arntzen, Association for Teacher Education in Europe, Brussels 2014, pp. 74-87.

implements two projects per semester. During the studies students participate in ten projects. All students participate in international projects as well and strengthen their English language skills⁵⁰.

Most of the projects co-operation partners are small or medium size companies. The projects are free of charge to the companies, but they may pay a voluntary office fee (125€). The projects are implemented for the developing needs of the companies. Typical project topics are business, marketing and communication plans, accounting and business environmental analysis and organizing events. Co-operation partners participate in the project process by using their own time, resources and expertise. In any case, the active interaction between students and their co-operation partner is important for the students' motivation. During the projects the students create strong networks and relationships to promote their future careers. The goal of the P2P learning model is to fill the gap between traditional education and companies' expectations⁵¹.

A P2P-project starts with negotiations (a brief) with a co-operation partner. The partner introduces his organization and project objectives. In the briefing, the student team agrees on the preliminary timetable, checkups and contacting principles with the partner. Each team consists of 4-7 students, together first and senior students, because of developing orientation skills. Each project is supervised by two lecturers. The team and lecturers have weekly meeting with the agenda drawn up in advance⁵².

After the first meeting, the project team completes a team agreement and select a project manager and secretary for the project. The team agreement consists of team's internal procedures and rules. The project manager's main duties are communicating with the co-operation partner, the scheduling and leading the meetings. The project manager makes sure that the objectives will be met. Besides, the project manager delegates tasks, monitors the progress and also motivates and encourages other team members. The project secretary is in charge of the meeting agendas and memos³².

At the beginning, the team creates the project plan and a theoretical mind map to guide the project. The project plan includes the project's background information, the project organization, goals, actions, risks, budget and timetable. The second phase in the project is theory writing, the theory is linked to the project's practical part. In order to do this, the team has to familiarize themselves with the theme in question and read books, academic articles and other research materials⁵³.

⁵⁰ https://soleops.laurea.fi/opsnet/disp/fi/ops_Etusivu/tab/nop/sea?lukuvuosi=2859840&ryhmytyyp=1&stack=push [18.2.2015]

⁵¹ Laurea, P2P Orientation manual, unpublished dissertation defended in the Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Hyvinkää on 2015.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Laurea, P2P Orientation manual, unpublished dissertation defended in the Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Hyvinkää on 2015.

The team implements the project's practical activities after the planning and theory writing phase. The activities are based on the project plan approved by the co-operation partner. Along with this, there are 2-3 theoretical skills demonstration presented by students. The aim of the demonstration is to prove the theoretical competence and encourage communication skills. The presentations are similar to oral examinations³³.

In the final phase the results are presented for the co-operation partner. Also the student team prepares the final report of the project. The final report consists of the theoretical framework, implementation of project, results, recommendations, conclusions and project evaluation. The results and business recommendations for the company are particularly focused on³³.

After the final meeting with the co-operation partner the students' evaluation follows. Evaluation is based on the students' self-evaluation, team evaluation and lecturers' evaluation. In addition feedback is asked from the co-operation partner which pays special attention to co-operation and communication within the team and company during the project, as well as the usefulness of the results. Team and personal evaluation is based on the following equal three levels: Project planning and implementation, research and reporting and team work, interaction and communication. The amount of the ECTS determines the amount of work. Normally projects will accumulate 15 ECTS (1 ECTS = 1 credit = 27 hours) and the success of the project is shown in the grades. (Excellent 5, good 4-3, satisfactory 2-1)³³.

The main objective of the research was to discover if the P2P learning model developed project management and leadership skills. Research was executed as a theme interview study, which took place from the beginning of January until the end of February 2015. There were ten interviewees, two male and eight female students aged between 21 and 37, all were senior P2P Business Students in Laurea. They had started their studies in 2013 and all had worked as a project manager one to three times. Interviewees were selected on purpose to be senior students, because they have more experience in projects and operating as a project manager. Interviewees also specialized in P2P project management. Interview themes were based on the role of project manager and dealt with management and leadership skills used in projects. During the interviews we found out what students had learnt about project management and how those skills would help them with their future careers. In the following paragraphs we introduce some results.

Interviewees were asked what they have learnt about leadership skills and managing a team when they worked as a project manager. All of them answered that they have learnt how important it is to prepare a project plan and realistic schedule. With those basic things in order it is easier to delegate tasks equally to team members. In their answers many interviewees pointed out, that it is important to give tasks fairly to team members and the project manager must trust that his team members can manage the tasks. Two interviewees said, that the

project manager cannot and should not do everything by himself and by delegating and trusting his team members he makes them more committed to the project. Four interviewees also said that a project manager should have very good human relations skills. Personal opinions of team members should be avoided. Also the point that the project manager should listen to his team members was mentioned. The project manager needs to hear, what team members have to say about the project. One student gave a good guideline for the project manager:

“Listen to your team members, treat them fairly, give them responsibility and trust them”.

In the P2P learning model students work with real-life companies. Interviewees were asked when they worked as a project manager that what the most important things in working with a co-operation partner. All answered that communication is the most important thing. Three of them said that it is important to make a communication plan at the beginning of the project. The plan includes how often they should communicate, what the co-operation partner wants to know during the project, how they should communicate and who is responsible for the communication. Interviewees also pointed out that if there is something to ask that should be done immediately so that project can go proceed on time and towards it goals. Three interviewees also said that it is vital for the project to determine its objectives with the co-operation partner at the beginning of the project. This is done so that the scope is realistic and the objectives that the co-operation partner wants to achieve can really be achieved. All interviewees considered communication between students and the co-operation partner most important.

“Suitable, clear and regular communication is the most important thing in working with a co-operation partner”.

As we have learnt, the project manager deals with different kinds of challenges. Interviewees were asked, what challenges they had faced when they worked as a project manager. Nine of the interviewees answered that they had difficulties with team members, who didn't deliver their tasks on time or not deliver at all. This risks the project's whole schedule. Another challenge mentioned, that is linked to the first one, was that team members were not motivated. When we asked how they dealt with those problems all interviewees emphasized the meaning of discussion. They had either discussed in private with the challenging team member or discussed the situation with the whole team. Sometimes project managers had to ask some help from lecturers. With discussions they have tried to understand what is wrong and what could be done differently to get the motivation for the project back on track. Usually discussions have worked and challenging team members have understood that they have acted wrongly. Sometimes tasks had to be discussed again and the project manager had taken a more supervisory role.

Although most of the time challenges were solved with discussions. Like one student said:

“The problem has to be faced and solved immediately by discussing”.

Every project is always evaluated. In the P2P-model students evaluate themselves, each other, how they have worked as a team and how the project went through all the steps. Lecturers also evaluate all students and work that has been done and the co-operation partner also gives his feedback. Interviewees were asked what the central things in a project’s evaluation were when they worked as a project manager. Eight of them said an honest description of everyone’s actions and tasks’ quality had been given. Evaluation cannot be based on personal opinions but on common criteria. Three of the interviewees also said that giving and getting feedback is important because that is how one can learn to be better. Six interviewees also stressed that at the end it is important to evaluate if the project has achieved its objectives and the quality of work meets the standards. They mentioned that work itself might be good, but doesn’t meet with the objectives. Three of the interviewees said that they had used intervening the evaluation to check with the lecturers that the project was aiming towards its objectives and if there was something to be done differently, either individually or by the team. None of the interviewees criticized the evaluation methods used in the P2P. This can be taken that evaluation is functioning and straightforward.

We aimed to know, how and what kind of readiness the interviewees learnt in P2P-projects when they acted as a project manager. Interviewees named many things and they all underlined the fact that practice has improved themselves and made them more prepared for a working life. Nearly all of them mentioned that they have learnt to make schedules and work with them, they have improved their organizational skills, delegating skills and the importance of planning and thinking it all through. Also nearly all mentioned that they have learnt how to work in a team with different people. They have also learned a great deal of relationship skills- how to listen to other people, what they can demand, how to impact and appreciate them and their opinions. Also responsibility, initiative and professionalism were mentioned. One interviewee said:

“I feel that I am able to manage a real project. I have gained a clear image of what real working life is. I believe that in my working life I will benefit from the fact that I have already worked with many different people”.

Summary

In this research we surveyed if the P2P strengthens students’ management and leadership skills and if it does, how. The research’s sample was ten senior P2P students, so results cannot be generalized widely, but can be held reliable because of the experience of the interviewed students. According to results, the P2P

develops competence of management and leadership skills necessary in project management in working life. In research students mentioned critical skills from project management: planning, scheduling, supervising and evaluating. They have learnt these management skills by practice and have a clear vision of management. Most importantly they have learnt leadership skills that cannot be learned from books only. By practice they have learnt to work with different kinds of teams, appreciate team member's opinions and how to solve challenges. They have learnt to communicate with people in different situations, to motivate and listen to them. We can conclude that the P2P learning model strengthens students' working life management and leadership skills notably.