

Character Traits and Balance in Project Teams

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Illustrations by Patrick H. Hardin

Assessing the Eight Character Traits

One of the challenges at the onset of a project is understanding the dynamics of the project team. During project execution, individuals within a team will assume different character traits or roles depending on the task, personality, and team relationships. Some of these roles are beneficial to the team process while others inhibit team progress. There are eight basic character traits that support a positive team environment and eight traits that are harmful to the team environment. The list is not inclusive, but represents the roles most common in project teams. Many times the same individual assumes multiple roles both positive and negative during the course of a single meeting. Positive character traits increase team communication through encouragement, understanding, and knowledge, which improves team performance. Negative traits decrease team communication by discouraging, blocking, or misdirecting the flow of information which is critical to team effectiveness. Project managers and the team must be aware of these roles and work to reinforce the positive while discouraging the negative characteristics. Project Managers require skill in all the positive traits in order to perform or coach others fulfilling those positive roles.

The following eight positive character traits are for the most part self-explanatory. However, the accompanying text is intended to aid readers in identifying and understanding the various positive traits and offer a few ideas to maintain balance in these traits within the team environment.

Organizer – Organizational ability is a key required trait for project managers. They organize activities, plan agendas, keep the team on topic, and help facilitate team discussions. Some people are natural organizers and enjoy the involvement and satisfaction they get from this work. The project managers must utilize these natural organizers to free up time allowing them to fill in or coach others in meeting team needs. Utilizing team members in this capacity helps to develop these skills for future advancement to project manager, develops backup for an unexpected project manager absence, and increases the organizer's ownership in the team.

Recorder – Almost every group has a person that is a recorder. They always carries a laptop computer, are extremely proficient in typing, and are generally very well versed in all forms of written communication. This is the perfect person to help document meetings. Apply caution to ensure the individual does not use the recording function to avoid participation or become overburdened to the point it inhibits their participation. Mitigate these situations by rotating the function among the other participants, encouraging use of group memory, and only recording decisions, issues, and action plans. Group memory simply involves recording decisions and action plans in front of the group for concurrence as the meeting progresses. This activity keeps meeting minutes concise and ensures concurrence.

Time Keeper – This is someone that watches the clock and prods the team when the meeting is falling behind in the agenda. This individual is usually very sensitive to breaks and lunch as well. There are times when a precise schedule of breaks needs to take a lower priority to the issue the team is discussing. Many times the timekeeper is sensitive to these situations or the project manager may have to politely override the timekeeper by suggesting the group give an issue more priority.

Inquirer – The inquirer is always seeking information and data which helps to keep the team discussions more objective and less emotional. The inquirer is good at asking the right questions and getting to the heart of an issue. Always encourage this trait and do not let anyone put a team member down for asking pertinent questions.

Expert – Most diverse teams have multiple subject matter experts for a variety of topics. They provide critical information needed by the team. Make sure the experts really have the credentials and experience to back up their expert status. Also, the other team members must not abdicate the issues to the expert without full discussion and buy in from the entire team. The discussion builds understanding, increases team commitment, and improves decision quality.

Analyst – The analyst forte is numbers, formulas, statistics, and spreadsheets. This is a valuable resource particularly in gathering and interpreting information and data to aid in understanding issues, developing problem solving solutions, and decision making.

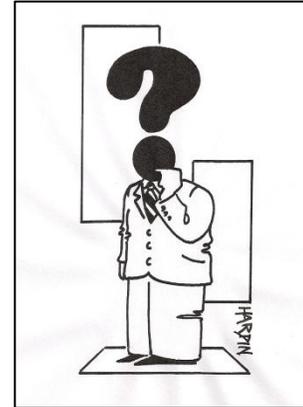
Achiever – The achiever is highly motivated in both personal and professional goal achievement, gets great satisfaction in accomplishing measurable goals, and always strives to do more. Achievers are fast to volunteer and push the team to reach higher in their goals. Achievers tend to be overly optimistic and impatient with those that do not share their enthusiasm. Utilize them to help the team set stretch goals, but do not let their impatience discourage achievement of team consensus.

Peacemaker – Peacemakers are skilled in interpersonal relations and strive to minimize conflict. They like to encourage people and give positive feedback. Their weakness is they tend to shy away from conflict of any sort, preferring instead to ignore or smooth over conflict rather than face it. However, conflict in the proper environment helps to stimulate thinking and creativity. Use their interpersonal relationship skills and positive encouragement in a “compromise and collaborative mode” and keep them out of an “avoid and acceptance mode” of conflict resolution.

Eight Negative Traits

The cartoonist, Patrick Hardin, illustrates eight negative character traits in the following figures to provide a humorous visualization of these styles. The accompanying text provides descriptive information and offers some suggestions for minimizing their impact on the team.

Riddler – Have you ever been in a meeting and not able to figure out the point the speaker was making? If so, you probably encountered the Riddler trait. No one can figure out what point the Riddler is trying to make or identify with the perspective. As the adjacent figure indicates, a Riddler is a big question mark. They tend to be disorganized and not in tune with the rest of the group. Without discouraging participation, it is sometimes helpful for the facilitator or organizer to ask a clarifying question or offer a statement regarding the point of discussion or value to the group to get the team on track. This can also indicate a lack of preparing for the discussion topic which can be addressed by establishing preparation as a norm and providing proper material ahead of time.



Devil's Advocate - It is not uncommon for someone to start promoting an opposite viewpoint even though they do not take ownership of it. In the proper situation this can provide value by fostering more discussion. However, in many cases this is a means of disguising their disagreement with the topic and creating dissenting opinions. As the horns and trident in the figure imply, this trait is the Devil's Advocate. In a team environment, this goes against the principles of honesty and trust. Without an honest statement of position from the participants, confusion occurs in the discussion and it is difficult to assess the group's level of consensus. The recorder can help to offset this trait by asking participants to state their position on issues and seeking consensus.



Filibuster – The Filibuster consumes large amounts of time, adds little value, and prevents others from contributing to the conversation. This individual has difficulty getting to the point, tends to introduce war stories, and leads the discussion off on tangents. Try utilizing a combination of agenda topic timing, the timekeeper trait, and the norm of full participation to improve efficiency of the discussion. For example, before beginning a topic that might foster a filibuster, discuss the importance of everyone participating and the time constraints of the topic within the agenda. Ask the team to set a time limit on individual discussion and suggest playing a game of hot potato. Ask someone to volunteer as the game timekeeper and provide an object that is lightweight but easily thrown across the room without causing any damage (such as a Nerf ball or tennis ball). The timekeeper's role is to toss the object to anyone that is within 15 - 30 seconds of the discussion time limit. The speaker must wrap up quickly and toss the object back to the timekeeper. Using this on repeated occasions builds discussion habits for the group, makes the timing issue fun, and usually develops some lighthearted joking without ever taking issue with the Filibuster directly.



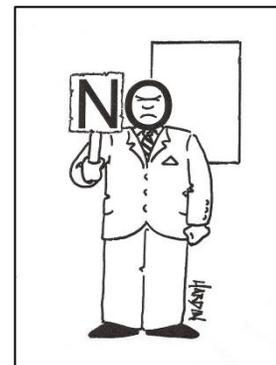
Hermit – The quiet person in the corner that contributes very little to the discussion and is difficult to read because of their stoic body language is probably the Hermit. As the cartoon illustrates, the Hermit tries to hide or become invisible to avoid participation whenever possible. This is harmful to the team because it represents a resource loss due to the Hermit’s lack of contribution that limits team achievement. Similar to the previous approach using the hot potato game, try approaching the participation issue by discussing the value of everyone participating and suggest using a game called cold potato. The facilitator starts the game by tossing a soft object that is easily thrown across the room to respond to a discussion question. When the speaker is done, they toss the object to someone else that has not spoken. The last person to speak tosses the object back to the facilitator. If more discussion is appropriate, the process is repeated. This has the same benefits as hot potato. If you have both the Filibuster and Hermit traits in your group, combine the two games into one hot potato-cold potato game and things really get interesting. If the team contains the inquirer trait, this is very beneficial in helping to draw out the ideas and participation of the Hermit.



Critic – Criticizing every idea and everyone is the modus operandi of the Critic. Often the critical individual does this to increase their own standing or demonstrate their superior knowledge at the expense of others. This is typified by the “yes, but” prima donna attitude in the cartoon. Factual data provided by an expert based on their knowledge and experience can help to diffuse the Critic. In addition, team norms regarding participation, respect, and avoiding criticism, enforced by the entire team can provide an objective way to minimize the negative effects of the Critic without getting into personality debates.



Naysayer – This character trait is a close cousin to the Critic. The Naysayer opposes every idea or suggestion, feels any challenge is too great, and sees negative in everything. Other names are pessimist or glass half-empty type of person. Naysayers are destructive when attempting to establish team stretch goals or developing action plans. Utilize the team norms, risk management process, and achiever traits to counteract the negative effects. The Naysayer’s one value is in helping to identify risk as part of the risk management process provided they offer specific examples and data to support their pessimistic position.



Procrastinator – Everyone knows someone that is a great procrastinator and most everyone has exhibited this trait at one time or another. As the cartoon implies, the Procrastinator moves at a snail’s pace, always putting everything off to the last minute. The Procrastinator generally has good intentions, is very convincing in their commitment, but never finds the time. This procrastination trait is particularly harmful in the team process due to the extensive level of interdependence of the activities. Failure to complete an activity according to plan can have a domino effect on the project. When encountering anyone with this trait, give them only short term assignments or assignments with a series of interim dates or check points so that progress is checked regularly and failure to complete an item results in only minor impact on the project which can easily be recovered. Use the traits of the achiever to seek results and demand action to keep the Procrastinator on track and meeting commitments.



Gladiator – The Gladiator or antagonist has a rather negative outlook on life believing that people are against them and seeing conspiracy behind every door. The gladiator has a strong dominating personality, has a win-at-all-cost mentality, loves conflict, and uses force as the primary mode in conflict. Although the Gladiator is the first person you would chose for your side when going into battle, it is a very destructive trait in the team environment. Reassigning the Gladiator into a traditional functional organization with a lot of structure is probably the best fit; however, in a typical project matrix environment the project manager may not have the authority or available resources to implement the reassignment. When dealing with this trait in the team, make assignments that minimize interaction or isolate the Gladiator to a specific portion of the project to minimize the personality trait impact on the overall project. If you have an individual that has a good relationship with the Gladiator and possesses strong peacemaker traits, pairing them up in assignments can be an effective combination since each offsets the weaknesses of the other.



People exhibiting negative traits can be very frustrating. When faced with these challenging styles, visualize them in the cartoon. It is the same principle as visualizing your audience as naked to reduce your fear in a presentation. The visualization lightens your frustration and helps you to work more effectively with the negative individual. Always keep in mind you have an entire team available to help. Use the positive traits within the team to balance the negative traits. Table A on the following page aligns the positive roles with the respective negative role they are most useful in mitigating. The blending of these various team roles establishes the team personality and significantly influences the team’s overall effectiveness. The norms established in the initial team formation meeting (see the related “Team Norms” whitepaper) are a major tool to regulate team behavior and provide an objective way to address negative traits without introducing personal opinion or judgment.

Table A: Role Mitigation in a Team Environment

| Positive Roles | Negative Roles | Positive Role Mitigation Effect |
|----------------|------------------|--|
| Organizer | Riddler | Clarifies and summarizes comments |
| Recorder | Devil's Advocate | Seeks position and participant consensus |
| Time Keeper | Filibuster | Keeps discussion within time limits |
| Inquirer | Hermit | Seeks info and input from participants |
| Expert | Critic | Data-based on knowledge and experience |
| Analyst | Naysayer | Analysis to dispute negative viewpoints |
| Achiever | Procrastinator | Seeks results and demands action |
| Peacemaker | Gladiator | Strives for peace and harmony |

Project Manager – the Super Juggler

A project manager is a key part of any project and must possess a wide array of skills. As an example, in a past leadership team event where all the roles and responsibilities were reviewed, someone commented that a project manager needed to be superman. In the following meeting, one of the project managers brought in a picture of himself dressed as superman. This characterization is a common view. In actuality the most important attribute is not super power, but super balance. A more accurate characterization of a project manager is that of a juggler as shown in the cartoon. The three balls he is juggling represent *time*, *cost*, and *scope*. The cup and saucer on the juggler's head may be thought of as *project quality* and *technical concerns* while the ball on which he is balancing are the *people issues*. A project manager does not require superpower if he has a good team to support him, but he must exercise balance in almost everything he does. In fact, too much skill in any area may cause him to lose the balance needed for a given situation. This is a common problem occurring when a highly technical person doing a great job becomes project manager. Instead of delegating or working with the team in solving technical issues, he jumps in and does it, losing team synergy and often arriving at the wrong solution.



In one situation, the project manager was great at building relationships and keeping the peace, but could not handle confrontation and stepping up to difficult issues. When things got very stressful, his focus on relationships and keeping the peace caused him to sacrifice the project schedule at a critical point in the project. It was necessary to replace him in order to maintain the project deliverables. In another situation, the project manager was highly knowledgeable in project management and very demanding toward project deliverables, but utterly lacking in people skills, requiring intervention on several occasions to keep the teams functioning. It was

necessary to be very selective in the projects and role he played to minimize the adverse consequences of his lack of people skills.

Keep the Balance

Projects require balance throughout their life cycle. Beginning with the initial selection of projects, companies must ensure the project portfolio has the proper balance of *risk*, *resource requirements*, and *strategic fit* in terms of sustaining current and growing future business. Project teams need a good balance of advantages and opportunities for all participants. A project charter including Mission Statement, Goals, and Roles and Responsibilities must reflect this balance. The situational leadership model in team management involves balancing the team readiness with the appropriate leadership involvement. During schedule planning and project execution, risk management provides a means to balance all risk factors. In similar fashion, the triple constraints of time, cost, and scope must be in balance over the project life cycle in order to achieve success. In the character traits of teams, the positive traits offset the negative traits to maintain team balance. These examples and many more encountered over a typical project life cycle confirm the importance of maintaining balance in your projects.

Dean Baker has an extensive background in project management and team building, and is highly skilled at organizing multi-company, multi-divisional, and multi-departmental projects to improve a company's productivity and speed of implementation. He is a Principal in Fulcrum Edge, Inc. a business advisory firm serving leaders in business. Dean has a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering from General Motors Institute (Kettering University) and a Master's degree in Electric Engineering from the University of Michigan, and is a certified Project Management Professional®. He is also the author of *Multi-Company Project Management: Maximizing Business Results through Strategic Collaboration*.

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