15.328 Team Project

Master's Core Team Project (15.328, linked to OP 15.311)
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Fall, 2003

CONTENTS:

1. Background

1.1 Goals
1.2 Structure
1.3 Schedule
1.4 Grading
1.5 Support

2. Frequently Asked Questions

2.1 Choosing an organization and initiative
2.2 Maintaining professional standards
2.3 Collecting data
2.4 Phone support
2.5 Giving feedback to the organization
2.6 Team grades
2.7 What to do with too many organizations
2.8 Contents of a report

3. Sample Team Project Topics

4. Calendar

1. Background

Teamwork is a critical business competency, regardless of industry or organization. Start-up companies are basically small teams of highly motivated people, often with little prior business experience. Team skills are essential to coordinate individuals and adapt the organization to the unpredictable demands of the new economy. Even huge established companies are restructuring into teams around projects, product lines, customers, new kinds of partnerships, etc. New technologies and competitive pressures are breaking up hierarchies; lower levels of the organization have more responsibility, act more flexibly. Command-and-control has given way to network-and-negotiate.

For all the above reasons and many more, the Sloan Master's Core contains a significant team experience. We know from practical experience that teams are meaningful only if there is something riding on the team performance, such as a common goal with real consequences. In the Team Project, which is part of the OP course, everyone on the team matters, every relationship influences the team performance, and every conflict is a potential learning opportunity. "In the modern organization we manage as if everyone is a volunteer." You have to learning to work together, to maintain purpose and commitment, and to develop as team members and leaders.

1.1 Goals

The Team Project has the goals of

(1) Developing teamwork and leadership skills and
(2) Learning from the analysis of a change initiative in a real-world company using concepts from 15.311 Organizational Processes (OP) and other Core courses.

1.2 Structure

The Team Project has no regular class schedule or weekly readings. Almost everything is oriented around your team and your project, with only a few deadlines. You design your own structure for accomplishing the task and meeting your personal and team goals. Each team is responsible for analyzing a recent, ongoing, or anticipated initiative at a real company. Examples might be a strategic reorientation, organizational restructuring, introduction of a new technology, or worker participation program. The initiative should be important to the company, represent a change, and have organizational implications.

In the Project Instructions (Module 2A of the OP readings), there are a series of steps that are described in some detail. We list them here but refer you to the Project Instructions document for more information:

1. Discuss and clarify your team's objectives.
2. Identify an organization in which you will conduct your analysis.

3. Negotiate entry and conditions.
4. Choose an initiative the organization is attempting to implement as the focus of your analysis.
5. Think about the central questions outlined in the **Organizational Analysis Guide** to help plan your data collection (pp. 15-20 of Module 2A).
6. Collect a variety of appropriate data.
7. Analyze your data with respect to the questions outlined in the Guide.
8. Evaluate the initiative based on your analysis and make recommendations.
9. Select a metaphor to represent the organization's attempt to implement this initiative.
10. Deliver your presentation in class.
11. Prepare a final report, incorporating any feedback provided during the presentation in class.
12. Exit the organization and deliver whatever was agreed upon.

Your team will have met during Orientation and begun to work on various Core courses. The Team Project is introduced in OP on Thursday, September 11. A brief update report is required during Team Day, September 26 (Friday). Although Team Day is primarily about your helping you understand your own team better, it is also an opportunity to begin setting goals and planning the Team Project.

Each team has a faculty advisor/coach who will be the main contact person for the teams and responsible for grading the written team reports. Prof. Carroll is the advisor for 40 of the teams; the OP instructors act as advisors for the other 20 teams. We have a TA for all the teams regarding the Team Projects (there are separate OP TAs for each section). Teams are required to meet at least twice with their faculty advisor (for approximately one hour in late September/early October and again in November), but they may request additional meetings. One day prior to each of these required meetings, the teams must send to their faculty advisor a 2-page team self-reflection reporting on how the project is going and how the team is functioning as a project team.

Teams will present their analyses in an oral report to their Communications section near the end of the semester (see Communications syllabus). The presentations offer an opportunity to get feedback. The written team report is due to the advisor on December 9.

1.3 Schedule

The Team Project consists of three phases: entry, data collection, and report.

Entry. First, teams identify and negotiate entry to an organization and determine the initiative they will study and the scope of their project in terms of the unit(s) of the organization, deliverables, etc.

1. The Communications course (15.280) will assign a task of writing a **Letter of Agreement** to the organization describing the expectations around the Team

Project. This is an exercise in writing for two audiences. The assignment is due October 9. The Communications faculty will grade it, but a copy of the Letter must be sent to the Team Project faculty advisor.

2. The teams must have a **meeting** (usually 30 minutes) **with the Team Project faculty advisor** by October 9. This means the last week of September, or first week of October. One day prior to this meeting, each team must submit a **2-page team self-reflection** reporting on how the project is going and how the team is functioning as a project team.

3. Each team must submit a **brief statement** by October 9 describing the organization they are working with and the initiative they will be analyzing.

Data collection. Second, teams collect data from the organization. This typically involves obtaining documents, searching the Internet and other public information, interviewing organization members, directly observing meetings or other aspects of the organization, etc.

1. There is a required **second team meeting** (usually one hour) with the Team Project faculty advisor in November. At this point, the teams should have collected much of their data and be thinking about what they have found. It is a good moment to discuss with the advisor what the report should contain, what additional data you may need, and any other questions. One day prior to this meeting, each team must submit a **2-page team self-reflection** reporting on how the project is going and how the team is functioning as a project team.

Report. Third, teams analyze their observations and write up their oral and written reports.

1. The teams present an **oral report** in the first week of December in the Communications course. The Communications faculty will grade the reports. When possible, the Team Project faculty advisor will also listen to the reports, but because the OP sections are divided into smaller groups for the Communications course, it will not be physically possible for the advisors to hear all reports.

2. The teams present a **written report** due December 9. The Team Project faculty advisor grades the report for content only; the Communication faculty grades the report for structure.

3. There is usually a **deliverable to the organization**, such as a written report or oral presentation. This is negotiated with the organization, but the advisor can help create a practical and useful product.

1.4 Grading

The Team Project is graded as part of the OP course. The 6 units of OP and 3 units of Team Project are treated as a single 9-unit course, with the two grades "locked" together. The grade on the written team project report (content only) counts as 1/2 of the grade for both OP (15.311) and Team Project (15.328). Team members receive the same team grade for the written team project report but receive individual grades for the OP assignments.

1.5 Support

The Team Project is a relatively unstructured assignment that is challenging for some teams. However, there are many sources of help:

1. The Team Project faculty advisor
2. The Team Project TA
3. The OP faculty and TA
4. The Ocean advisors
5. The Master's office
6. The Career Development Office (which sometimes helps find organizations)
7. Second year students (Pilots, etc.) who have been through the Team Project
8. The Team Project website on class server (15.328) which has FAQs, etc.
9. The Team Project handbook (this book!)
10. In case of conflict within teams or outside the team, the MIT Ombuds Office

2. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

2.1 Choosing an organization and an initiative

1. **Q:** *How do we find an organization?*

   A: In previous years, many teams use their personal networks (i.e., places they have worked, friends' organizations etc.). Others have been able to get access to a setting that interests them by asking. Many places find a contact with MIT Sloan and its students to be a great incentive. They also see this as an opportunity to do some self-analysis and maybe get some free consulting (the report).

2. **Q:** *Do we need to work with a specific type of company?*

   A: No, your group can choose any type of organization. In previous years, there have been all sorts of projects, including start-ups, departments of big companies, private and public sector organizations etc. Many teams are creative in finding organizations such as charities, museums, libraries, churches, hotels, restaurants and so forth.

3. **Q:** *How big an organization should we choose?*

A: It's tempting to pick a big company or a small start-up. Big companies are hard to study. It's better to get some detailed, in-depth knowledge of a small unit than vague, surface knowledge of a big company. If you are studying the impact of a new initiative in a large company, try to focus on a particular department or other unit so you can really get some detail from the people directly involved. Small start-ups are also hard to study, although they are very exciting. Be aware that, right now, employees of small companies are anxious, overworked, and maybe job hunting. Sometimes the best places are not the obvious ones. Libraries, hospitals, churches, charities and lots of other organizations are facing many changes and have much less access to consultants and change specialists. They may be more open to your efforts and appreciative of what they can learn from you.

4. **Q:** *What "initiatives" are suitable to study?*

   A: Organizations usually have several initiatives they are pursuing. These can be any sort of changes with organizational implications, that is, effects on the way people work, how work is organized, who is more or less important, how we think about ourselves (mission, identity, community, etc.). A purely technical initiative such as changing the accounting system that has few implications for work and organization would not be a good choice. The initiative should be something that the people in the organization care about and that is interesting to you as well.

2.2 How do I avoid embarrassing myself and/or Sloan?

1. **Q:** *What's at stake?*

   A: Your reputation is at stake, and so is the reputation of Sloan. Many students study organizations that hire Sloanies, donate money to Sloan, partner with Sloan, etc. It's important to maintain a professional attitude.

2. **Q:** *What should I wear when visiting the organization?*

   A: Try to match their normal pattern. Ask someone who knows the place. If they are formal, be formal. If they are casual, be casual. When in doubt, it's better to be a little more formal than you think you need. On later visits, you can always adjust.

2.3 How do we collect data?

1. **Q:** *How many interviews?*

A: Once you know what the initiative is and the specific organization, you will have a better idea of how many interviews you will need, and other access to documents, direct observation of offices and meetings, etc. Typically, teams do a few initial scoping interviews to identify what part of the organization they will focus on, and what initiative. The specific focus often depends on where there seems to be interest or access. Then you can define key stakeholders or knowledgeable people for interviews. A rough guess at interviews might be 10. A guess at the length of interviews is one hour. It's good practice to send two team members on each interview, often team members who themselves are varied in background and demographics. Once the personal contact has been made in interviews, there might be some follow-up of additional questions by phone, email, etc.

2. **Q:** *How can we do direct observations?*

   A: Anytime you are on site at the organization you should keep your eyes and ears open. What does the place look like? What's on the walls? What are people doing? Is it busy, relaxed, social, isolating, formal, hectic, playful, serious? What do people have in their offices -- piles of paper, pictures of family, degrees on the walls, three computers on every desk? It may be useful to sit in on meetings about the initiative to get a sense of teamwork, authority, leadership, communication, etc.

3. **Q:** *Would an email survey questionnaire be useful?*

   A: It could be very useful if you have specific questions to ask and are willing to accept the low response rate that usually results. Be careful not to do this as your first technique unless you have thought carefully about it. You may not know what to ask, and starting off by sending email that most people will ignore may be a poor foundation for a relationship. Once people have met you and started talking with you, they are more willing to respond to email.

4. **Q:** *Can we just ask, "What is your culture?"*

   A: It is difficult for people to articulate their knowledge about their culture. Culture is more than the visible symbols and signs we can observe, and it is more than the espoused values and beliefs. We often learn about the deeper assumptions underlying the culture by seeing contradictions between what is espoused and what is acted on, or between what some people say and what others say. Consider your own last job and how you entered as a newcomer to a company but a year later were a knowledgeable insider. Could someone have just told you what you needed to know to be skilled in the culture? You probably had to ask, and observe, and try things out to see what reaction they produce. In analyzing the culture of your project site, you are like a newcomer trying to learn in just a few hours or days what normally takes months. Therefore, don't expect that people can just tell you their culture. Look in the Organizational Analysis

Guide (Module 2A) for useful questions, but also observe when you have the opportunity and look for contradictions and surprises that can reveal the deeper aspects of the culture. Some informants may be more culturally "expert" than others. In many manufacturing contexts, the first-line supervisors are far more savvy about what it takes to get things done than the senior managers (who can be out of touch). The people that others turn to with their problems, or that occupy key positions in the workflow, or that have been around for a while, are likely to know the culture better.

2.4 Phone support

1. **Q:** *Can we have access to a phone that our team can use for interviews, etc.?*

   A: SES has made some strides in this area within the past term and will continue working the problem. We put phone jacks and telephones into smaller classrooms that can be used by teams. They will identify "pockets of time" for availability of these rooms, then schedule these blocks with the Registrar's group. We then put in place a sign-up system for 1/2 hour slots by teams, with up to one hour as the limit.

2.5 Should We Give Feedback to the Organization?

1. **Q:** *Should We Give Feedback to the Organization?*

   A: Prof. Paul Carlile: I always strongly encouraged (expected) each of my teams to present their findings to the organization or group that they studied. Some of the particular challenges that arose were when what they had to present to them may have been more negative than the organization expected. In one case that I remember well, the biggest problem in a small company was how the CEO was controlling too much of the day to day and it was killing the company. As I met with each team we would obviously talk about what was presentable to the company along with issues of confidentiality. In many cases, teams were paid significant compliments by the organization and some were invited back to study more.

2. **Q:** *How much feedback?*

   A: Don't start promising all sorts of things without asking first. Suggest that you want to be helpful and are happy to share your observations and thinking in a way that is mutually acceptable. Try to determine how much feedback they want, and of what sort. If it is a defensive organization with lots of conflict, they may want to tightly control what you say and to whom. If it's an open place that is eager for all kinds of feedback, they will want to hear more. It's best to ask the person you are working with and/or the boss of the unit you are studying what they want in the way of feedback.

2.6 Team grades

1. **Q:** *Will all members of the team get the same grade?*

   A: Yes, all members of your team will get one grade for the presentation and a second grade for the write-up.

2.7 What if we have two organizations?

1. **Q:** *What if we have two organizations?*

   A: Be sure to thank the organization for its willingness to participate. Before you say no, if you are comfortable doing so, ask if they are willing to have a different team work with them. Suggest that there may be other teams that have not located a suitable organization. You can email the class or post on the online 15.328 bulletin board that there is an opportunity. Within a few days, we would know if a team wanted to work with the company.

2.8 What's in a report?

1. **Q:** *How long is a report?*

   A: Reports are limited to 15 pages, including attachments. I prefer double space and 12 point font, but you can go to 1.5 space and 12 point font if necessary. It's useful to learn how to write a tight, well-argued paper. Don't drop the font size because it becomes painful to read for mature eyes and you wouldn't want that pain to subconsciously transfer into your grade.

   Q: *What's in a report?*

   A: One way to think of a report is a set of layers. The foundation is the observations and data you collect. The next layer is your analysis of the data, the understanding and insight you achieve. The analysis is typically based on concepts and frameworks such as the three lenses, management of change, teams, and so forth. Many of these concepts come from your readings in OP, Strategy, Communications, etc. These two layers are the heart of the report. The next layer is prediction of the future. Teams differ in how much they want to predict and recommend. It's a matter of your preferences and perhaps what is being asked of you by the site. What do you think will happen next, and why do you think so? What are the long-term consequences of the initiative? Finally, when you make recommendations to create alternative futures, be clear on the reasoning. What is your rationale for your predictions and recommendations? Your reasoning is probably more important for the paper and for feedback to the site than the recommendations themselves.

2. **Q:** *Do we need to include recommendations?*

   A: Projects MUST include some descriptive data on what was observed/heard/read AND analysis of what this means in terms of frameworks such as 3 lenses, change, etc. In 2001, recommendations were not required; some (but not all) teams included predictions and recommendations. However, this year (2003), we will require all teams to include recommendations. The OP faculty will issue more specific instructions later in the semester. Remember, it is important to give the logic/reasoning underlying your predictions and recommendations.

3. **Q:** *Where is the Organizational Analysis Guide?*

   A: pp. 15-19 of Module 2A Conducting Team Projects, in the 15.328 reader

3 Sample team project topics

BigCo + SmallCo (1999)

The team analyzed the integration processes that followed the acquisition of a small, specialized Boston consulting firm by one of the five largest consulting firms in the world. The companies granted access on condition that the real company names not be used. The project focused on two of the integration task forces that were set up to operationalize the integration processes following the merger, and compared the two task forces, one of which was more successful than the other. The team recommended action steps for improving task forces in future integration processes.

Growth Initiative at Start-up (1999)

The team analyzed the initiative undertaken by an entrepreneurial start-up firm, which described its business as “a proactive entertainment broker” (it made plans and bookings for entertainment for professionals too busy to book restaurants, buy tickets, etc.). In the wake of its success in Boston, it planned to expand the Boston model to Chicago and San Francisco. The team analyzed the Boston model and assessed the prospects for a successful expansion.

Growth at New Magazine (1997)

The magazine was launched nationally in 1996 from a base in Boston by two former editors of the *Harvard Business Review*. In the fall of 1996, the firm planned to increase the staff by 30% within the next few months, as the magazine moved from bi-monthly to monthly publication. The team analyzed the current organization of the magazine, and identified the challenges that the firm would face in carrying out its expansion.

Introducing a New IT System (1999)

A privately-owned container shipping firm with a small Boston office had experienced unexpected delays in its introduction of a new IT system. The team analyzed the previous problems with the IT initiative and the source of the difficulties, and assessed the reasons why the current effort to drive the initiative to completion seemed to be working much better. The company was interested because it hoped that after rolling out the new system throughout the US, it could introduce it throughout the company's global operations, and it was interested in the team's analysis of the initiative.

Improving Product Development Process (1999)

New England-based manufacturer of athletic apparel had experienced growing competitive problems, and the delays in developing new products had been identified as a major source of the problems. The team analyzed the product development process and the current proposals within the company for improving it, and assessed the prospects for their successful implementation.

The Creation of the Product Manager Position at Software Co.

An entrepreneurial software applications firm that had experienced rapid growth had decided that it needed to introduce more structure into its organization, and had set up a New Markets Solutions Group to identify opportunities for leveraging its capabilities in new markets. Part of this initiative involved the creation of a new position, Product Manager, the first of which was filled by a highly qualified newcomer with a background in one of the target industries. The team analyzed the challenges facing the new product manager as she attempted to work effectively with the organization, and suggested some action steps to improve the likelihood of her success.

Reorganization at an MIT Lab (1998)

A large MIT lab moved from a project-based organization to a functional/project matrix structure. The team analyzed the reasons behind the change, as seen by different members of the organization, and analyzed both the steps involved in implementing the change and the remaining points of friction and difficulty. The team made some recommendations for improving the final steps of the change.

Campus Recruiting at Consulting Co. (1999)

A fast-growing young Internet consulting firm that had relied on informal and word-of-mouth methods for recruiting its people decided to introduce a formal campus recruiting system to enable it to meet its growing personnel needs. The team looked at the challenges facing the new Campus Recruiting Officer (as part of its assessment the team conducted a questionnaire survey among Sloan students on awareness of and perceptions of the company, a survey that the firm found very helpful in its efforts).

The Impact of Merger on a Hospital Radiology Residency Program (1999)

The merger of two of Boston's leading academic hospitals involved the integration of two different residency programs that had very different medical specialties, cultures, and practices. The team analyzed the changes that this integration involved, identified some of the key problems, and made some recommendations for addressing those problems.

Effects of Constrained Resources on a Federal Government Agency

The team focused on the organizational challenges faced by a Boston-based federal agency whose funding was being steadily reduced and which was trying simultaneously to identify new sources of revenue and to use its federal resources and networks more efficiently (the agency asked to remain anonymous). The team analyzed the problems faced by the agency's top managers as they attempted to flatten the agency's organization, increase its links to external and to internal customers, and keep up morale in a time of shrinking resources.

4 Calendar

26 September	Team Day Due: come prepared to answer questions about the structure of your team, the work done so far, your list of potential companies
September/Oct	Choice of the company, exploration phase, contacts starts, proposal to company submitted
09 October	Communication letter due
26 September 2002/ 09 October	Meeting with the Faculty Advisor (remember to schedule in advance!) Due: 2-page team self-reflection, a couple of days before the meeting
09 October	Submission of brief statement of project and initiative

Oct-Nov	Data gathering, company visits, research activities, interviews, debrief, team meetings
November	Meeting with the Faculty Advisor (remember to schedule in advance!) Due: 2-page team self-reflection, a couple of days before the meeting
01 Dec/03 Dec	Communication presentations
9 December	Final written report due