

Working with cross-functional teams

As a project manager, you will likely work with cross-functional teams. A cross-functional team includes team members who have different backgrounds, types of expertise, and job functions. Even though these team members have different skill sets, occupy different roles, and may even work in different departments, they are all working towards a common goal: the successful completion of your project.

Sometimes the members of a cross-functional team are referred to as “T-shaped professionals.” They are skilled in how to collaborate and innovate with those in different job functions and across different departments, but they also contribute their own specific areas of expertise. Each member of a cross-functional team has their own unique perspective and experience, bringing different ideas and strategies to the project.

Managing cross-functional teams effectively requires the project manager to:



Clarify goals



Get team members with the right skills



Measure progress



Recognize efforts

Let's explore each of these ideas in more detail.

Clarify goals

When working with cross-functional teams, it is important to ensure that each member of the team understands their role, how they support each other, and the common goals of the project. It is vital to set clear goals for the team and make sure that the team understands those

goals. Be direct and concise, avoiding extraneous details and explanations. When communicating task or project goals, make sure you define key items, such as budget, deadlines, quality requirements, or important resources. Ensure your team members understand task and project goals by encouraging them to ask questions and clarify information. It will be up to you to continuously check in with your team to make sure they're all moving towards their goals, staying on track, and completing quality work. Cross-functional teams may work in different departments, be in different physical locations, and have different leadership, but all team members work together with the project manager to support the current project. Your project may be competing against other priorities, so communicating clearly and often with your team—and vice versa—helps you identify any potential issues or concerns before they arise.

Get team members with the right skills

Making sure you have team members with the correct skill sets for each of the project functions is critical. If you are building an airplane and you've got five engineers but no mechanics, you are missing a key element of your cross-functional team. As the project manager, you must help ensure that your team has the right people with the right skill sets needed for the project to succeed. Later in this program, we will discuss some tools you can use to help you identify the skill sets needed to accomplish your project tasks.

Measure progress

Showing your team how much they have accomplished helps keep them motivated. Take the time to measure and communicate the project's progress across the cross-functional team. This helps everyone see the full picture and recognize their impact on the project. You can measure progress in many ways, including meeting key milestones, completing project tasks, and meeting project goals on time and within budget. Regularly communicate with your team members to check on their progress. Ask them if they anticipate being finished on time. If not, ask how you can help them succeed. Keep track of the team's progress throughout the project by documenting when tasks and goals are completed, and let your team members know if the project is on track or not. Make sure you communicate successes, delays, or issues, to the team so they know how the project is progressing. Keeping everyone informed is essential to the project's success.

Recognize efforts

Sometimes, when you work with cross-functional teams, there are certain skills that get recognized more than others. A mechanic could get accolades for coming up with the solution to a problem within the project, while the finance member who sourced the funding might be forgotten. As a project manager, it is your job to make sure that each member of your cross-functional team recognizes the value of their efforts each step of the way. You have learned the importance of building relationships with stakeholders, and building relationships with your cross-functional team members is just as important. Learning what makes your team members feel supported, giving and taking feedback, and being mindful of each individual's background, personal identifiers, and work style can help mediate some of the differences among team members.

Key takeaway

Being able to communicate clearly with team members, clarify the goals of the project, get team members with the right skills, measure team progress, and recognize team members' efforts is an important part of your role as the project manager, and is key to your project's success.