



NAC Executive Insights

Bravo Company: Lessons Learned in Project Management

Key Points

- Team building is an essential element of project management.
- Clear strategy and execution plan are essential for success.
- Work the plan.
- Create execution differentiators.
- Delegation of responsibility and authority is essential to overall project success.
- Communicate before, during, and after.
- Learn from each opportunity and each other; adjust.
- Resources are constrained; use them wisely and share for team success.
- Win...and have fun.

Introduction

A team building session was held with about 120 members of the management team. While highly successful in achieving its primary objective, the lessons learned by one “Company” are instructional with respect to many of the attributes of good project management.

Project Location and Strategic Objectives

Bravo Company was one of six companies that participated in a series of paintball “engagements” at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. The objectives of the engagements were team building and having fun, but for each company it also included competition and success.

Initially Bravo Company was to consist of 19 members of the management team and a Marine, who would join the Company in paintball combat. Bravo Company consisted of veterans as well as novices to paintball, it included a mix of participants from different corporate units, and thus was not unlike the staff composition of most engineering and construction projects. The obstacles as well as the constraints to be faced were unknown. Leadership of Bravo Company had been selected randomly. As Bravo Company prepared for battle and gained experience, the team grew and strategy and tactics evolved.

Missing Resources

Before Bravo Company could even begin the trip by bus to Camp Pendleton, it quickly learned that about 15 percent of its targeted staff would be unavailable for combat due to other commitments (sound familiar?). Rather than focus on this potential disadvantage, Bravo Company set out on a series of tasks that are the hallmark of good project management. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Develop a Clear Strategy and Execution Plan

On the bus ride to Camp Pendleton, Bravo Company quickly defined a set of strategic objectives to accomplish. These built on the broad mission of team building and having fun and were fairly singularly focused—we wanted to win. With an agreed-to strategic objective in hand, Bravo Company began using all available team knowledge to better understand the challenges likely to face and what best practices might be engaged. Team expertise in “paintball,” strategy, combat operations, human resources, and communications were identified by the team members as key. Bravo Company then developed a general strategy that would have flexibility to respond to the particular challenges and also would evolve as each combat mission unfolded.

Key elements of this strategy included:

- Development of a clear organization with well-defined responsibilities.
- Communication strategy for distance-based communications if that became necessary.
- Recruitment strategy, focused on getting the best Marine available.
- Recognizing and leveraging the different strengths of the team.
- Development of an execution plan that provided for independent operation within an overall strategy.
- Continuous communication and intelligence gathering.
- Resource management and sharing.
- An ongoing lessons learned process.

Putting the Plan into Action

Bravo Company recognized that in any large-scale operation, especially one that was likely to be fast-paced and spread out at some distance, would make it difficult for the Company commander to provide instantaneous direction to even our reduced force of 16. A plan was therefore developed to have both a chain of command as well as a communications strategy.

Bravo Company, building on the collective experience of its team members, decided to establish three squads in order to provide for quicker communication in the field, to get more detailed planning within a common overall framework by each squad, and to facilitate coordinated but independent operations in the field. The team sought to gain a “force multiplier” advantage, but concentrated on having specialized expertise in each squad.

First Squad, under the leadership of Annette, became Bravo Company’s flying or flanking squad. Members were assigned based on their self-assessment of being able to run fast. First Squad’s job was simple in theory: get as wide as possible on one flank and move forward as fast as possible. As the battle unfolded, they were to provide flanking crossfire. During the action, they were able to get behind the opposing forces in several instances. Theory was much easier than reality. Through excellent teamwork, however, and with supporting cover fire from the other two squads, First Squad was successful in its execution and contributed substantially to overall Bravo Company performance.

Second squad, under the leadership of Darrell, was Bravo Company's base squad. Members were assigned to this squad based on their self-assessment of not being able to run. Second Squad's job was to move to nearby high ground, provide cover fire for Third Squad, and keep the opposing force under fire while First Squad went wide and deep on the opposite flank. They also anchored the flank opposite from First Squad to ensure that we in turn were not outflanked and surprised on the field of battle. They provided "eyes" to ensure that we did not lose sight of an evolving situation.

Third Squad, led by James, consisted of those who weren't smart enough to self-identify their strengths or weaknesses and be assigned to one of the first two squads. Third Squad became our suicide squad with the task of holding ground in the middle, drawing fire, and advancing deliberately while First Squad moved into the flanking position. Third Squad drew the heaviest fire, but sustained some of the fewest casualties by carefully planning each move, coordinating closely within the squad and by coordinating its moves with First Squad and Second Squad.

Bravo Company's efforts were enhanced by strategic recruitment of the "best Marine available," which was achieved through strong HR support provided by Floyd and by the Marine's compelling vision of what success might look like. Nicknamed "Rambo," the Marine in Bravo Company was quickly assigned to Third Squad, the suicide squad. Upon joining, Rambo was debriefed and Bravo Company capitalized on his prior knowledge of the fields of battle and the terrain. Bravo Company then refined its broad strategies and tactics. Although clearly a strong addition to the team, Rambo was eliminated early in two of the four competitions. Our ability to learn from his expertise, however, provided overall team improvement.

Constant communications before and during the execution phase was something Bravo Company recognized the importance of even before arriving at Camp Pendleton. Coordination of action was also recognized as important. So, with this in mind, the Bravo commander and each of the squad leaders had programmed each other into their Blackberry's (now this dates the story!) to allow for quick communication of a coordinated attack in the event they lost line of site communication. As the battlefield took shape, this communication strategy was not required, but Bravo Company had thought through the possibility and put a contingency plan in place.

Learning and Adjusting

At the end of each phase (battle), Bravo Company got itself ready for the next challenge by recharging its compressed air and reloading its paintballs. Preparation did not stop there. The team debriefed from the prior encounter, identified weaknesses, and developed corrective action plans and identified strengths it could exploit in the next encounter. This learning process continued as we were assigned a "field of play" and high ground or low ground, with strategy and tactics refined as we gathered new information. Constant communication during battle allowed tactics to be refined as new challenges emerged. Overall strategy remained constant and provided a framework for successful, coordinated action by the three squads of Bravo Company.

At the outset we were given 500 paintballs apiece. Resources would be constrained and therefore had to be used judiciously. In each of the first two rounds, Bravo Company was able to take full advantage of its strategic dominance and husband its resources carefully. By the third round, however, the challenges

became increasingly difficult and the experience of our opponents exceeded those faced in the first two rounds. We consumed 60 percent of our resources in this battle, after having consumed only about 20 percent in the first two combined. Victory was ours, but we went into the final round with extremely limited resources and no room for failure.

We met this challenge prior to the fourth round by reallocating our resources among the team and continuing the reallocation process in the field. Giving up limited resources when you yourself are short and under fire is certainly a true hallmark of good teamwork and is a situation that is encountered on many engineering and construction projects. This learning and adjusting strategy paid dividends in the final round, allowing us to win by superior numbers even as time ran out before final (but inevitable) victory.

Team Results

The results of teamwork and having some fun were also an exercise in project management and used many of the same strategies, tactics, and processes that we apply in a larger scale on each of our projects.

Final results: Bravo Company racked up four wins, no losses, a medal, achy joints, and the pride of accomplishment!

Summary

The following are key take-aways from Bravo Company that are common with good project management:

- Match talent and strengths to the needs of the team.
- Exercise agility and flexibility around the execution plan to respond to changing conditions and needs.
- Communication is the “IT” factor.
- The overall success of the project is the goal, which may require reallocating resources across the team to achieve project success.

About the Author

Bob Prieto was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2011. He is a senior executive who is effective in shaping and executing business strategy and a recognized leader within the infrastructure, engineering, and construction industries.

Although the author and NAC have made every effort to ensure accuracy and completeness of the advice or information presented within, NAC and the author assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, omissions or inconsistencies it may contain, or for any results obtained from the use of this information. The information is provided on an “as is” basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness, and without any warranties of any kind whatsoever, express or implied. Reliance on any information provided by NAC or the author is solely at your own risk.

