Lessons Learned From Managing a New Statistical Programming Group

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ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on lessons learned by a new statistical programming manager, managing a new group in a very challenging environment. Real life examples will be shared and examined to make the presentation more relevant and valuable to the audience. My true personal feeling of being a new manager of less than one year will be scrutinized in order to promote exchanges with experienced and potential managers in the audience. The whole presentation aims at generating discussions on creating positive working environment for programmers as well as the managers. Ultimately, our patients will benefit from our timely delivery of quality products created by statistical programmers.

INTRODUCTION

A new statistical programming group of 10 people was created due to an organizational change in the summer of 2010. Members in the group vary widely in terms of age, gender, nations of origin, personalities, technical skills and working experience in the pharmaceutical industry. Almost half of them are new hires. Our customers require that we continue to provide the highest quality and on time deliveries of our products without being negatively affected by the transition. For most of the members there was a new physical, technical, social and management environment. Challenges were and are clear for each programmer to adapt to the new environment and continue to work productively on the ongoing projects.

I was recruited as a new manager for this group. The challenges were obvious for establishing this new group and especially for a new manager who has been a programmer for most of his career, including some years as a project lead for a global team.

BE CONFIDENT

As a new manager, I am facing issues which I have not experienced before. Some of the new tasks I like and some I was not quite sure. After so many years of programming experience, I knew well all the aspects of programming work. I have also met quite a few programming managers. Based on what I know about those managers' strengths and weaknesses, I got an initial idea on what kind of manager I wanted to be. My goal, as a manager, is to effectively accomplish success and results through others. That is a big deviation from my previous role as a programmer. I was looking for my own management style. I want to be a manger people respect, and still maintain a close touch with everyone in the team. I want to give everyone my trust and also let them know it is my responsibility to keep a close eye on their project progress and aid them to succeed. With this kind of mindset, I started my first managerial job with full confidence. I knew I would be able to provide value-added service to my team because I have a strong technical background and I was in their position for a long time. For the new managerial tasks which I didn't have extensive experience before, I knew I should be able to understand programmers' thinking and speak their language. With high confidence, I feel my chance of success is getting greater both technically and managerially. For example, I was able to help resolve technical issues with my programmers. Some difficult conversations, such as those regarding team member performance issues, can have constructive results.

STAY AHEAD OF THE GAME

When working with 9 individuals in all the aspects of their assignments, many issues are unexpected and can't be planned. In order to stay ahead of the game, I tried to get familiar with our system and all the projects I oversee, to understand our customers' needs and upper management's expectations, to get to know everyone's strengths, weaknesses, communication styles and even personalities. All of this will pay off later on when issues emerge during the day-to-day operation.

As a manger, I don't need to spend the most of the time on programming. But I must be familiar with the assignments my team members are working on and their progress. At any time, I could get questions from customers, upper management or team leads to check what someone is doing. I have to be ready when someone asks to double check why a certain function is not working properly or someone needs a second eye to look at codes.

FOCUS ON TRAINING

People often say pharmaceutical companies are in one of the most regulated industries. It is not only our obligation to be well trained on SOPs and work processes, but also a pathway to success down the road. I pay a lot of attention to training, not only to my new hires but also to existing employees since they were all experiencing system changes over the past 12 months.

For the new hires, I concentrated on setting up systems such as how to access our computing environment and get familiar with the system. Since they were not familiar with the Unix system, I conducted training on Unix, including alias setup, Unix editor, X window environment and version concept. I really wanted to take advantage of the power of the Unix system, even though the Unix platform may not be in the main stream for most companies in the industry. I, myself, love Unix, including VI as its editor. It's natural for me to tell people who are not comfortable with Unix, that this is the best system you can get. The training and my conviction helped people to build their confidence and ease some frustration during the introduction period. As we all know, each company has its own library of abbreviations and special terms unique to the company and it's very important to identify them and have a good understanding of them. Simple jargon may mean one thing in one company, but something entirely different in another company.

For existing employees, their stress came from the fact that they had to make adjustment to their work habits due to the changes, including the transition to working off site. Since they were previously working at the company, minor adjustments were difficult to get used to, especially since our customers were expecting no productivity loss due to the transition. I was trying my best to educate those people regarding the changes and the best way to do certain tasks in the new environment.

BUILD THE TEAM SPIRIT

As a new team with a mixture of backgrounds, it is critical to have a friendly team environment where people help each other. Especially for this group, we must take advantage of the fact that most people have quite a few years of experience as statistical programmers. My new programmers were assigned to different project teams in various therapeutic areas. In order to reduce the burden on each team leads and meet management expectations, I attended every project meeting at the beginning. I conducted knowledge sharing sessions right after each project meeting, so that the programmers could be brought up to speed as soon as possible. As you can imagine, new people in new environments always have a lot of knowledge and ideas they can share among themselves. As a manager, I want to make sure their contribution to the team has my proper attention. I can provide all the necessary means for making it easier and faster and this has proved to be very effective.

I greatly encouraged the existing employees to share their knowledge and experience with new hires. I emphasized the impact it may bring to the team when a good suggestion is adopted. A knowledge database was created to facilitate the training process for both technical and administrative needs. Due to organizational changes, there was some anxiety among existing employees. The building of team spirit quickly overcame any negative impact.

I also strive to create an environment where everyone feels we depend on each other for our success. Helping others is not a waste of time. By sharing, you contribute not only to your own success but also to that of the rest of the team. When any issues arise, we should resolve them at the lowest possible level. This guideline encourages team work and makes sure everyone pushes for team results instead of just a personal one.

STRENGTHEN THE COMMUNICATIONS

Good communications are important to any project team, let alone for our team which has deliverables on an almost daily basis. To make sure I have all the latest information, I have an open door policy for my team members. I set up a system to make regular communication as a requirement between my team members and myself. I request weekly status update reports and one-on-ones. The weekly report is due every Friday and must include 2-week's project information, the week just passed and the upcoming week. Any issues as well as achievements should be noted in the report. The report is also available to my managers in case there is any question from them. During the weekly one-on-ones we review issues on the report and discuss any topics/questions in more detail. At first, it was not easy for some programmers to follow this schedule. However, with my insistence, it has become a routine. In addition, quite a few of my team members are working on a global team, and good communications bridge the gap of time difference and lack of face to face interaction.

PERFORM AS A SUPER USER

Some companies have the role of system super user to the user community. I had an experience as a super user in another company. I really like this idea and believe it can lead to improved productivity if managed properly. As a manager, I have a better chance to make it work.

In general, any issues to be reported to IT helpdesk should be checked with me first to see if the same issue has been reported and the current status. However, that doesn't mean a programmer is not allowed to directly ask for IT support without my approval if I can't be reached. If I determine the reported issue could impact every user, I will work with IT to find a solution and share it with the whole team. The goal is to reduce issue resolution time and to improve the helpdesk efficiency to our programming group by decreasing the number of repetitive issues escalated to the helpdesk.

LOOK BACK

I have been a manager for less than one year. I am looking forward to a healthy growth of my team. However, I have not been away from a programmer for a long time. If for some reason, I have to go back to programming, I think I have a good idea of how to be a better team player and an employee whom my manager can trust and depend upon. For people who are looking for a manager opportunity, not only do you need to learn how to be a manager, but also try to do your best at your current position so that the chance to be a manager is higher, and the road to become a manager is shorter. One lesson I learned and I want to share with all potential managers is that you must take care of all the aspects of your daily work, including those non-programming tasks which are not your favorite. Thus, a part of non-programming may weigh disproportionately on your performance. It may impact you positively, such as making a group presentation on SAS tips. In the same token, it can also have a negative impact for you when you ignore some administrative tasks resulting in additional management intervention and the increased of management cost.

CONCLUSION

Being a manager for a new group enriches my work experiences. The challenges are enormous and the reward is priceless. Luckily, with the help from our clients, my team members, my managers and the company, I was able to use my soft skills on management to nurture a positive working environment for both my team members and myself. My technical aspiration and know-how's enable me to use management tools efficiently so that each member is encouraged to complete his/her responsibilities with minimal management intervention. This allows me to spend more time providing value-added services to my team.

If you have an inspiration to be a manager, you should go for it. It is not guaranteed you will get the job. Even if you get it, the job may not fit you or you may not like it. However, the by-product of trying to be a manager is most likely a positive outcome. It may lead you to a better performance review and greater rewards, professionally, personally and potentially monetarily.

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