Collective intake

Exercise for the conversation between sponsor and team at the start of a Project Startup

The whole project team needs a good picture of the assignment. Participants can read in advance what has already been recorded, but experience shows that this is not enough for team members to take shared ownership. An interactive exploration of the assignment does make that possible. So organise a collective intake.

PURPOSE	The team members receive unfiltered information from the sponsor. The sponsor gets to know the team, feels its commitment and knows its concerns. All perspectives, knowledge and experience come to the table. Trust grows between sponsor and team.
WHEN	At the start of the Project Startup, after the introductions.
WITH WHOM	The whole project team and preferably the actual sponsor. If that is not possible, find someone who can actually represent the THEY side (clients, users), for example a delegated sponsor, the overall project manager or an involved programme manager. A facilitator guides the conversation, so that the project manager can take part.
WHAT YOU NEED	A flip chart or (online) whiteboard with the components of the project definition, and possibly the project definition canvas for notes.

HOW TO GO ABOUT IT

1. **Introduce the collective intake.** Explain why it is important and compliment the team and the sponsor for taking the time for this. Display the main components of the project definition and the questions that go with them (objective, result, scope demarcation and so on) and explain them briefly if needed.
2. **Let the sponsor begin.** Invite him or her to speak from the heart about why the project is important. What is the ambition of this project? What do you hope it will bring about or solve? What are your dreams for this project? Why is it important to you?
3. **Do a round of Concerns and Commitments.** All team members take turns to share their commitment and their main concern. On commitment: Why is the project important to you? What do you hope it will bring (you)? On concerns: What is your main concern about the project or your own contribution? What seems hardest to you? Then ask the sponsor to reflect and to share his or her concerns too.

   Tip: encourage team members to really speak up, and ask follow-up questions. If useful, note the concerns on a flip chart, so that you can discuss them later.
4. **Facilitate the dialogue.** Let the team not only ask the sponsor questions, but also talk amongst themselves. If you hear a question that is actually a suggestion, kindly ask the person to share it as an idea. If you see a reaction on someone's face, invite that person to add something. Have the team go through the components of the project definition: are there any more questions, is it clear what is expected of you?
5. **Close.** Make clear that there are always open questions and uncertainties. Agree how the team can reach the sponsor during the Project Startup. Ask the sponsor to reflect on the dialogue and invite him or her to compliment the team: Do you have confidence in the team? Have the project manager thank the sponsor, and then say a clear goodbye.

Tip: make sure you know before the Project Startup how the sponsor can be reached for questions later in the day.

IF THE SPONSOR IS NOT PRESENT

Then the project manager is the team's main source of information, and you do the intake with him or her. Make sure the team itself actively asks questions and formulates the assignment. In any case, prevent the project manager from giving a long presentation about the project.

NEXT: SHARPENING THE PROJECT DEFINITION

Even if the project definition seems crystal clear on paper, give the team time to really make the main components their own. Decide in advance with the project manager which components to cover, for example the objective, a list of results and subdeliverables, the main users and their questions and concerns. Have the team summarise them on a flip chart. It helps if the project manager takes part as a participant and someone else does the writing.

- **Parallel groups:** two groups work on the same project definition and present to each other; the team then decides what can be combined and where there is still a real difference of opinion.
- **Carousel:** pairs walk past tables, each with different components of the project definition, and read and add to them. Afterwards, make sure the whole is visible and that contradictions are put on the table.

If the project definition raises a great many questions, discuss with the project manager, and possibly the sponsor, whether it is wise to continue with the rest of the Project Startup. It is often better to clear up that uncertainty first; after that, the team can move ahead at full speed again.

NOTES