You can't manage a project without managing people

Project managers are often given complete responsibility for an initiative, but no real authority over the team members doing the work. For critical initiatives that cannot fail, the project is all about influencing the people to get the work done. Have you experienced one of the following scenarios?

A subject matter expert was just "volunteered" to be on your project. However, she is already working 50 hours a week.

One of your project team members is retiring in three months. She will be gone before the project is complete and is not committed her work.

The "A" player is not available so you are assigned the lesser-skilled "C" player to fill the "void".

In a perfect world, project managers could simply choose a team that "rocks," but as matrix managers we must utilize the team members we are given. So how can a project manager with no real authority lead a successful project? We must use our influence and leadership skills to motivate team members to act in the best interest of the project's goals.

Experienced vs. Exceptional

Most experienced project managers have acquired the ability to effectively lead the project initiation, planning, execution, control and close of an initiative – the logistical portion of project management. *Exceptional* project managers have fine tuned the "people" side of project management. They have the ability to use their people skills in three areas: managing the project team, interfacing with the client (or user) and interfacing with the rest of the company's organizations.

The following traits are *critical* in a project manager's ability to influence the behavior of the three areas above:

- *Organizational and interpersonal astuteness*
- *Ability to compromise*
- *High level of self-control*
- *Team builder*
- *Commitment to team member development*
- *Strong ability to change communication style based on individual need*
- *Ability to interface with the client/user*

The scenarios below represent common situations that project managers are likely to face during their career. Each scenario gives real examples of how I used the above traits as a project manager to influence the people on my team that were ultimately going to make or break my project.

Rally the troops

On cross-functional initiatives, project teams are usually made up of people that do not typically work together on a daily basis and may not even know each other. They may feel that they are simply thrown together and

expected to get down to business and start producing. This inevitably can lead to team member conflict and miscommunication.

I had this challenge on a very high visibility project. A core team worked to define, cost and gain approval for the idea and they felt a very strong sense of ownership. Once approved, I was assigned to manage the initiative and the team was expanded to take the project through implementation.

The new requirements team lead that was brought on board was initially viewed by the original core team as an outsider that could not possibly grasp the detailed knowledge needed in the necessary short timeframe. This created conflict and distrust among the team at large. I had to gain a deeper understanding of the specific concerns of the core team, *and fast*. Having been in a similar situation before, I quickly began to do the following:

- Scheduled a one-on-one meeting with each core team member
- Listened to their concerns and identified potential roadblocks
- Uncovered the core team's recommended solutions
- Gained buy-in to the new team roles in a way that supported their solution and the overarching objectives of the project

By talking to the individuals that made up the core team and having them identify the roadblocks and possible solutions the requirements lead would encounter helped them move from a distrustful to a supportive position. Once you have this conversation, individual attitudes toward the project will help you drive the desired next steps.

The result was a cohesive team that focused on the necessary details and solutions needed for the project's success, which resulted in respectful and trusting relationships.

This scenario shows how important it is for project managers to get their *entire* team on board by having one-on-one conversations to understand individual goals, concerns and solutions as it relates to the project objectives. Once this is done, you will have a broader understanding of what will motivate each team member and their career. In the process you will uncover new solutions and even potential risks that you may not have gained in a group setting or team meetings. Every team member has the opportunity to be successful, to learn from their project work and to be valued as a project team contributor.

The Non-Performer

A "non-performer" on a project team generally occurs in two situations:

1. She typically supports the best interests of her particular organization or department, but in the process may inhibit project progress.
2. She is over her work capacity and cannot commit the appropriate amount of time needed to complete the work.

In the first situation, you can leverage the commitment to help resolve the performance issue. Approach your team member's administrative supervisor and have a one-on-one conversation as in the previous example: mutually share concerns and discuss this roadblock. Ask for the supervisor's recommendations on modifying the team member's actions to aid the interest of both the department AND the project. It is always good to remind them of the importance of their representation via their team member. You should also have your

recommendations ready to present to the administrative supervisor, whether it is replacing the non-performer, asking the supervisor to address the individual directly or otherwise.

The second situation is very common. In today's world everyone is juggling more commitments than ever and some people may have more on their plate than others. If you have a team member who is over capacity, you have a couple of options:

- Work with them to learn what tasks can be removed to create capacity required for the project. Let them address the priorities and schedules. Most importantly, you should always recognize them for their committed efforts.

- Identify someone to support them (if achievable). This may be a less experienced person that can do some of the work with supervision and also be developed.

- Replace them. Go to their administrative supervisor to share the capacity concern and have another resource with capacity assigned.

If you have a team member who does not agree with the pre-defined expectations of them and their role on the team or does not want to make the effort to meet these expectations, it is time to escalate and have a discussion with their administrative supervisor. You should go into this conversation with facts regarding non-performance and the specific impact it is having, or will have, on the project and potentially the rest of the team.

Lack of Skills

You were assigned a team member that lacks the necessary skills required for the project and replacing the resource in this case is not an option. This scenario is not necessarily the team member's fault – it may be a condition/fact that the project manager has to accept.

To start, you should view this as a development opportunity for you and the team member, granted, it may be "under fire". You will be able to judge if the attitude and aptitude of the team member is contributing to making them more skilled and valuable to the team.

If the 'developmental' program is not working and your project is demonstrating the gap (budget and/or schedule are impacted due to this lack of project skills), your next step should be to address the issue with both the administrative supervisor and the project sponsor. Remember, *exceptional* project managers know when to escalate!

Sponsor is Missing in Action

Have you ever managed a project where the business sponsor, your internal client, is nowhere to be found or is not a visible resource to the team? Ultimately, the sponsor will be the recipient of the results of the project and they will be the ones measured on "success metrics," as well as the project team, on the project delivery. If it is not clear to the business sponsor that their success is dependent on you and your team, the project manager should be the one to deliver this message. This situation is more common in large corporations than

most would care to admit, and it can lead to constant scope creep and also a waning commitment of the project team and partnering resources.

I recently managed a large business transformation project for a retail organization where the business sponsor was not willing to commit the resources needed to complete the project. The sales area of this organization had determined that they could use a large highly graphical computer screen to increase sales of items not displayed in the store. When I came on board the technology team was making all screen display decisions, which meant the accountability for product success was resting entirely with team members who would not be using the product. The business sponsor was focused on immediate revenue from the product launch, but would not spare anyone to spend the amount of time needed to determine the key product details to make it successful.

As the project manager, I had to come up with a compromise to get the sponsor committed. The plan was to have the technology and business team members collect and manage all of the questions and design decisions into planned review sessions, where a review panel formed by the sponsor would make decisions. The panel was empowered to make all decisions even if all of the members could not be present at each session. Problem solved – the business review panel sanctioned by the sponsor owned the "fit" into the actual sales organization.

It is the project manager's responsibility to educate the business sponsor on their role and responsibility, and it is more than just writing the check for the project funding. Follow the steps below to gain the needed support and involvement from the business sponsor:

- Schedule regular "town hall" meetings between the business sponsor, the project team and any other key partners. In these meetings the sponsor should reiterate the significance and importance of the project as well as their commitment to helping the team to be successful.

- Establish scheduled meeting routines (generally monthly) that include the business sponsor and the project team. At a minimum, provide progress and issue report outs, change order and impact reviews for approval and project budget reviews.

- Educate the sponsor on their role in a steering/advisory/stakeholder committee. This role is significant as they are an effective communication vehicle as well as visibility for the business sponsor.

- Conduct scheduled one-on-one touch point meetings with the business sponsor and make yourself visible to them. Ensure you have "permission" to have unscheduled meetings when needed and constantly cultivate the relationship with the project sponsor because your success impacts their success.

Conclusion

As a project manager, it is likely that you will face one or more of the above scenarios. Use the tips and techniques discussed here to motivate and influence your team so that they are working in the best interests of the project. When you have fine tuned the "people" side of project management, you are on your way to becoming an *exceptional* project manager.

*Contributor – Deborah Barry, Executive Change Consultant