



Thoughts that Count...

By Stuart Gray (PMP/RMP)

WHEN PERFORMING REVERTS BACK TO STORMING

...and the Associated Risks

Most Project Managers will be familiar with psychologist Bruce Tuckman's group development concepts of Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing and the expected behaviours consistent with each stage.



Well that simplistic approach is a good start but as with life, it is not that simple. Any project manager with experience in the project arena regarding large numbers of staff will confirm that staff management is a skill within itself. It not only requires patience, it requires acceptance that not all people will always get along and dealing with the occasional meltdowns will impact on more than just the members involved. Addressing the conflict issues through a process of minimizing the possibility of occurrence is pretty important to reduce the human resources (HR) risk aspects.

Many/most project managers understandably do not have the required and detailed in-depth human resource skill regarding people management nor have the time to develop the skill as this is not their core function. Project managers will normally have a basic understanding and experience regarding staff issues. The situation becomes a challenge if the project group or functional organizations do not have the required HR expertise and experience from a project aspect to manage staff issues.

Human beings are very complicated; not only with respect to projects and yes this also refers to managers. It is a key performance issue to have an adaptive and preventative process in dealing with the conflict issues around the people assigned to the project group. This includes the associated personalities, interrelationships, familiarity, and over familiarity, lack of familiarity, social circles and politics.

The number of projects that run over lengthy and extended periods (say five years plus) are few compared to the number of medium and short term projects an organization will be exposed to in general. Most large projects fall into the shorter time period of up to a year or two or even shorter. This is due to the nature of projects (and economics often being an important factor). Generally longer project ventures tend to be grouped into the quasi-traditional business under the corporate umbrella of company operations. In many instances with respect to shorter projects the long term risk of conflict does not have sufficient time to develop.

With large projects that may run for an extended period (even up to ten years and longer) due to the nature of the project there is likely to be staff conflict. The success is to deal with the conflict in a manner that protects both the project and the individual. There are many approaches, strategies and concepts in dealing with long period project staff conflict. Most important is to deal with issues as early as possible using a straightforward conflict resolution approach. My experience has shown this approach to be successful and to minimise ongoing risk.

In a large corporate structure with many projects being run through diverse business units there is a possibility of rotation of project management assigned staff throughout the wider

enterprise and this may minimize much of the interpersonal staffing challenges that would normally occur in a single extended project.

A dynamic that can contribute to minimizing the challenge is the level of involvement of the various HR groups of the organizations within the project, and their willingness and authority to interact. The HR interaction regarding the traditional HR function of an enterprise and the unwillingness to move staff performing adequately are contributing factors. In many instances this is driven by management and functional units. This practice of moving skilled staff to new departments and projects may require re-location and having to accept new and unknown challenges and this is out of the comfort zone of many managers and supervisors. Many times the old citation of "if it is not broken don't touch it" prevails, and while this approach has its merits it should not be allowed to have a negative impact due to the fear of change.

When you take all the dynamic possibilities including the general focus on project and business issues, the human side of the equation is often managed as a left handed affair (no disrespect to left handed people) or only addressed in a reactive manner—putting out fires. It is however very important to be aware of the psychological disposition and position of staff on long projects as human nature under these circumstances can lead to risk of conflict.

Consider the following as illustrations of the points made.



"In many instances conflict is ignored in the hope that it will go away. It seldom does."

When you do not have a change in seasons or staff variation within the working environment you will start to observe behavior that may eventually lead to dissatisfaction and increased risk to the project.

An individual only becomes familiar with a task after going through various stages. The first stage is the one of learning towards becoming competent (unless they already possess the skill set). Then comes the stage of being competent to being competent and experienced. That is when you have the highest productivity and quality and lowest risk. After this it is just a matter of time before the task becomes mundane if there is no variation (even though it may be a highly complex task). If left for an extended period of time, stimulation drops and ultimately mistakes creep in and the individual loses interest. What often results is that the individual seeks new stimulus by taking an interest in other areas, which may cause conflict with those already performing in that area, or the individuals may look outside of the environment for alternative employment.

Cultural differences are another potential source of conflict. Different cultural groups have different approaches in dealing with work processes as well as with gender, religion, age and many other aspects. If you do not have some basic knowledge around these cultural issues you may

well experience challenges. Most of these challenges do not surface immediately as people generally make attempts to get along.

Another big challenge is abrasive and aggressive managers and employees. These characters will be tolerated for some time but once again over extended periods, start handing out the flak jackets. Early resolution of the issues can save the day. Sometimes you just have to be strong and remove the problem, especially if you can identify it as a common source of several conflicts.

If a long project does not allow for career growth through promotion and you do not have the ability to decant project staff back into parent companies you may face challenges. In a healthy environment you will have consultants and assigned employees. Consultants by their very nature come and go and are exposed to variety so have different expectations about the client's role in promotion and career growth. Those staff assigned by a company, however, presents a different dynamic. Without a healthy migration, career growth prospects and transference of staff and skills back to the traditional business involved with the project, there may be negative consequences for the business.

A multitude of factors contribute to staff conflict. As project managers we should be proactive in our function and where we cannot resolve the issues

ourselves we should escalate them appropriately and ensure a document trail.

From experience, I can offer the following advice to minimize conflict and risk:

1. Do not allow the project to become the dumping ground for unproductive, low-performing or otherwise problematic staff. Managers are sometimes guilty of knowingly or unwittingly using projects as an escape repository for staff they prefer not to work with. Experience teaches that projects are where you need key performers and staff with experience.

2. Do not allow business units to poach project staff without an acceptable succession planning process. The project is normally the initial exposure and prime forming process for company reputation and future business. If you allow a drain of expertise without replenishment of staff with caliber, it is a recipe for disaster. It will create conflict for the staff that s as well as new members joining the project group.

3. Make sure the staff in the HR department of the organization or the project is experienced in project management-related staffing issues. This should include the necessary training and expertise. If this experience does not exist internally, find outside experience. The HR department

should have a good overview of the various projects in order to understand the staffing needs for the project department as well as the functional organization.

4. Make sure there is a reintegration plan for project-assigned staff back to the organization following project and phase closure. Many companies assign members to projects and then reemploy to fill the vacancy in the functional organization. This bad habit could cause uncertainty resulting in conflict and an unwillingness to become involved in projects.

5. Make sure project-assigned staff is still included in the traditional company business information distribution, social circles and events. Projects are a key integrated part of the business and not an island. At times there can be professional jealousy between the project members and traditional company staff. They are on the same team and every effort should be made to keep the team intact and harmonious.

6. Make sure the process of staff dialogues and staff development remains active and is not suspended due to project activities. You may need a unique process to address this in the project environment.

7. Keep the project staff active and productive and where possible introduce new stimulus and input. Staff with time on their hands will find things to do to fill the void, and these are not always constructive things.

8. Make sure staff is rewarded for activities that exceed project requirements in a balanced and consistent manner. The reward and incentive needn't be financially based and should not be out of line with the company norms.

9. Make sure the HR department meets regularly with the project staff even if the project is located remotely. Lack of interaction between staff and the HR department, as one of the main channels of communication for addressing concerns, is a sure recipe for disaster. Include project managers and

functional managers in the process.

10. Always deal with staff conflict issues immediately through the HR department, observing official processes. In many instances conflict is ignored in the hope that it will go away. It seldom does. Most of the time it festers and grows and gets to a situation of major conflict. Remember there are always three sides to a story, the opinion or viewpoint from each party and then the neutral aspect.

Always remember as a project manager, while it may not be your responsibility to fulfill a role as HR manager; it is a priority that you take some ownership of staff conflict issues. Failure to do so could result in a high risk situation that will have a negative impact on both your performance and the project outcome.

Stuart Gray is a General Manager performing the role of Programme / Project Manager. He is currently in year 10 of a 15-year healthcare project involving medical devices management.

PMSA members based in and around Cape Town will be pleased to see that a comprehensive line-up of activities is planned for the next 10 months. Be sure to diarise these dates as a commitment to your professional development through gaining knowledge, sharing and networking.

PMSA Western Cape Branch - Monthly Event Roster

Month	Speaker	Topic	Knowledge area	Venue	Session
25 Sep 2012	Chris Whelan (CEO of Accelerate Cape Town)	The vision for Cape Town, and the role Accelerate Cape Town plays in achieving it	Planning	DiData	PM Talk
30 Oct 2012	Heather van Wyk	Benefits realisation	Cost, Value mangement	DiData	Am Worksession
22 Nov 2012	Carol Mould	Managing stakeholders and teams across career stages and generations	Human resources	DiData	PM Talk
Year end break - 2012					
29 Jan 2013	Arnold Schachat	A PM's Trials and Trails in the Middle east	Soft skills, humour	DiData	PM Talk
22 Feb 2013	Dr Herman Liebenberg	Humourology in Project Management + AGM	HR (team building)	Lesedi	PM Talk
25 Mar 2013	Reggie Brown	Microsoft Techniques, tools and techniques	Planning, Scheduling	Lesedi	Am Worksession
23 Apr 2013	Dr Christopher Worsley	Gearing our Organisation for effective Portfolio Management	Planning, Portfolio management	Lesedi	PM Talk
28 May 2013	Jacques Myburgh	Stakeholder personality differences and the project manager	Human resources	Lesedi	Am Worksession
25 Jun 2013	Ian Jay	Value Management	Value Management	DiData	PM Talk