

# Navigating the White Water of Project Management

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*ABSTRACT: To minimize conflict on a project, the manager must be a proactive information gatherer and a nonpareil communicator. The attributes of successful project managers are discussed, with attention also given to the traits of those who are less than successful. The various costs incurred when conflict remains unresolved on a project are summarized. It is stressed that conflict can present opportunities for both personal and organizational growth.*



How will the project's objectives be achieved? Who will do it and when will it be done? What do quality and success look like to each of the project's stakeholders? At what cost will it be realized? What risks have been identified, and how will a lower level of risk be achieved? Well, one thing is clear, the project will be carried out. It is also clear that conflict will be there. Conflict is inevitable. It is the natural human response of thinking people.

A project's environs are not dissimilar to those of a river with rapids. Conflict among project stakeholders is as normal and predictable as the white water part of a river. And when essayed without planning and without the right tools and an experienced guide, a project can be every bit as threatening as white water.

## BACKGROUND

In *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (Viking Penguin, 1991), authors Roger Fisher and William Ury list the minimal requirements for successfully making it through a project's white water. For conflict to be settled without irreparable harm to the project's objectives, one expects the following:

1) Each person leads and fosters integrity during the journey.

2) Each person seeks to understand the other's point of view without immediately evaluating it.

3) Emphasis is placed on obtaining agreement on shared interests for the project outcomes, not asserting initial fixed positions.

4) Objective criteria upon which the final decision will be made are documented issue by issue.

5) There is collaboration in determining factors critical to the success of both the project team and its individual members.

6) The interested parties were confident before finalizing the agreement that they all had something to gain.

7) The parties involved are listening, asking questions, clarifying various points, and both giving and receiving feedback.



You may very well wonder what each of these steps for avoiding conflict requires. They require a proactive information gatherer who rapidly communicates. The person must be a no-excuses project leader, not a manager. The least common denominator for at least 85 percent of the attributes of a "troubled" project is a noncommunicative project manager.

It turns out that the greatest adversaries to project success are silence and undecipherable messages. Conflict can arise from the following:

- 1) The expectations of individuals or groups working on a project may be different, and these differences remain unspoken.
- 2) There is considerable uncertainty within the project team about who actually has the authority to make decisions.
- 3) The work procedures implemented by the lead task managers differ markedly from those envisioned by the project manager, and these differences remain unspoken.
- 4) Unresolved personal antagonisms bedevil relationships between the interested parties.
- 5) No senior executive is asking to see useful evidence of asserted claims of success.

#### **ATTRIBUTES OF HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL PROJECT LEADERS**

In the opinion of those who work on projects, the attributes common to effective project leaders are as follows:

- 1) Thinks outside the box;
- 2) Values and invites the opinions of others;
- 3) Evinces sympathy and is open minded;
- 4) Provides routine feedback on performance results versus expectations on a face-to-face basis within 48 hours of becoming aware of either outstanding or below-average performance;
- 5) Creates an atmosphere of trust;
- 6) Perceives his or her role as that of a problem seeker and communicator;
- 7) Tailors his or her style of communication and conflict resolution to the persons in question;
- 8) Evinces enthusiasm about being the project leader.

#### **DEFICIENCIES OF INEFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGERS**

The attributes common to those who are less than effective as project managers, again based on the opinions of those who work on projects, are as follows:

- 1) Doesn't appear to understand what the staff below him or her does;
- 2) Focuses on the issue at hand rather than the long-term effect;
- 3) Tends to be quite self-centered;
- 4) Does not speak in terms of the project's vision, mission, goals, or objectives;
- 5) Is autocratic or tends to avoid conflict;

6) Is domineering and does not encourage open discussion;

7) Stalls when confronted with an opportunity disguised as a problem;

8) Is reluctant to change his or her stance on a given issue.

#### **ESTIMATING THE COST OF UNRESOLVED CONFLICT**

Senior managers would do well to consider the cost of ineffective conflict management. A simple listing of the pathology of conflict is provided below. Managers can add missed issues, clarify the ones provided, and then do the math:

- Value of an unhappy client (bearing in mind the statement by W. Edwards Deming that the largest cost of unacceptable work is both unknown and unknowable);
- Value of a dissatisfied client's client;
- Value of lost time within the workplace (affecting first the person directly involved, then this person's close colleagues, and finally the rest of the firm as the bad news travels);
- Internal meetings (convened to determine what happened and leading to additional work that is not charged to the client);
- External meetings (involving apologies and promises to the client);
- Legal advice (entailing phone consultations, office meetings, and administrative support to provide attorneys with relevant information);
- Liability insurance carrier;
- Accountant advice;
- Lost opportunity costs;
- Potential staff turnover;
- Cost of new hires;
- Productivity cost;
- Emotional and stress-related issues.

According to author Robert Bacal, conflict can have a salutary effect on an organization or can be ugly. The latter type may exhibit the following aspects:

- 1) An outright lack of response to a problem;
- 2) Administrative "orbiting," with a never-ending cycle of meetings followed by investigations followed by more meetings;
- 3) A penchant for secrecy, which almost guarantees a subsequent nuclear explosion;
- 4) Resolution by fiat, with the boss simply announcing that the conflict is over.

[Please put this article down and close your eyes. Not yet! First finish this paragraph. Think about a conflict you sense is brewing right now. With your eyes closed, go back to the earliest point you can in time and think about what early signs surfaced, how the signs were communicated, and to whom they were communicated. Now for a question: Is the project manager functioning as a project leader or as a project

manager? What are the odds that the latent conflict is still barely invisible to those who could collaborate to resolve it now, with minimum damage to ego and to the bottom line?]

### SUMMARY

There is no shortage of literature to guide you on your personal and corporate journey through the white water of project management from problem solving to conflict resolution and management to conflict transformation.

The popular perception that all conflict is negative is based on the way in which people have been trained to think about conflict. For those in a people-serving profession, the



competence and skill required to invite and effectively transform conflict can only evolve through the following steps:

- 1) A self-assessment of present competence;
- 2) A personal audit of what life has been with the present level of competence;
- 3) A willingness to make a commitment to lifelong learning.

This approach to conflict transformation recognizes the complexity of the interdisciplinary skills that project managers in the 21st century will have to possess. Only by mastering these skills, which will help them deal successfully with people, processes, and technology, will they be able to exhibit leadership.

### EPILOGUE

Conflict is inevitable because people care about what they are doing, how it is to be done, and how it will be appreciated. The conflict itself can be viewed as exhibiting either negative or positive energy. It can help form as well as destroy relationships. It can produce a better approach to work or keep one stuck on a well-worn path. Conflict may be perceived as either a danger to be avoided or an opportunity to be embraced. It's your choice.

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