TROUBLE-SHOOTER

The problem with teams

After a brief discussion about the need to have a strong team at the nucleus of any successful project, Liz Goodman and our trouble-shooter team look at some of the troublemakers you certainly would not want on your team…

Liz Goodman is a trouble-shooting project manager with a wealth of experience that she will be sharing with readers over coming issues. If you have a troubled project, whether in IT or not, then this is the place to start making changes. She has also put together the *Project Manager Today* trouble-shooting team of experts to help deal with readers' problems.

Project methodologies, schedules, actions logs, risk logs, etc, provide a framework for a project but they are not in themselves enough to make a project happen. This can only be accomplished by people who make up the teams.

Teams are usually created from many different areas of the organisation including business, technical, finance, commercial areas, as well as suppliers. Each team member will not only bring a variety of key skills but also their unique values, biases, work habits, and individual agendas.

Brought together for a temporary period of time, the members will not normally be accustomed to working with each other, nor will they necessarily have the experience of being on a project team. Their only common ground is the objective of reaching a specific goal. So, the environment for project management and project delivery lacks the stability normally associated with business-as-usual.

This situation is often compounded by the fact that many project managers do not have the luxury of selecting their team members. In the case of a troubled project, the existing team may be important in retaining knowledge and keeping the project moving, but it means that the new project manager is likely to inherit a team who are in a blame culture or disillusioned.

In some cases a project manager, newly appointed to a troubled project, may, for political or knowledge-based reasons, have to continue working with the previous project manager. An example of this occurred on a project in the retail industry, where it was not possible to remove the existing project manager without the risk of losing the potential contract. Clearly there could not be two project managers, so, in order to allow the original project manager to maintain 'face', it was agreed he should have the title 'Business Solutions Expert'. This allowed the new project manager to establish authority, but the relationship still proved difficult throughout the project as the increasing success of the new project manager caused resentment.

This example may have been exceptional, nevertheless many project managers complain that they cannot deliver because they do not have the right team, or that team resources are the reason for their stress.

Do project managers have the confidence to ask for what they need? Or is senior management part of the problem? For example, if a project manager tells senior management what skills are needed and why, and explains the effect that a lack of these skills will have on their operating results, will management recognise what is as stake and co-operate or not? Can a difficult or disruptive team member, or overly political sponsor, really bring a project to its knees?

Project managers need the knowledge, skills and ability to be able to ask for the right people, whether inside or outside the organisation, and deliver the best from the team. No amount of project framework will substitute for these skills.

Disruptive characters

This month the Trouble-shooter panel members have looked back on some troubled projects to find types of character that have caused them the most problems, and the ways in which they handled the relationships.

'The sabotaging sponsor'
by Barbara Wong, MBA, PMP, consultant & trainer

This was a situation with a business-process re-engineering project for a division of a global telecommunications company. The project was authorized by the corporate office and was given to a director who became the sponsor. He had been in charge of the project management organization for over five years but he had no knowledge of project management.

He refused to support the project manager who was appointed by his boss, the vice president. Although he was kept in the loop by the project manager, he never attended any meetings, or updates on the project, nor openly supported the project.

The vice president, the strong supporter of the project, resigned in the very early stages of the project. The sponsor became even more distant from the project. The 'silent treatment' and his unwillingness to obtain new knowledge were his ways of sabotaging the project.

The way this was handled was to recognise the lack of support early in the project and plan a workaround strategy. Alliances and support were built with a higher-level executive related to the project, who recognised the good project results. Good project performance could turn the sabotaging sponsor around.

'The political blocker'
by Richard Nelson, ICT Group Manager, Buckinghamshire County Council

The projects that have been made very difficult are those where a team member is giving negative influences to the rest of the team, not supplying the requested information and generally using delaying tactics.

In a particular case of delivering a new billing system for a global company, this situation was compounded by a team member who was very close to the president of the organisation. The impact can be very great on the other team members. They not only become frustrated as delays occur, but the project manager can be perceived to be losing authority.

The best course of action is perseverance, to get other stakeholders as allies, and to expose non-delivery, and the damage it is causing, at formal governance meetings.

'The unwanted resource'
by Chris Eldridge

Projects are sometimes used as 'dumping grounds' for resources who have not succeeded in other parts of the business.

While working on a government project, a resource was given who did not have the skills or ability to deliver, nor matched any of the requirements of the project. The potential impact for the rest of the team, who were already stretched, was of becoming frustrated or, worse still, having to try and find work for the person.
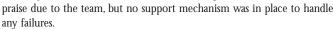
There are many ways of handling this situation, such as giving as many tasks as possible to the 'resource'. This has been known to prompt a request for a removal. Another solution is to demonstrate the lack of delivery and request a removal!

However, in this case a 'dummy role' was created which gave him the appearance of doing something, kept him away from the main work, and satisfied management.

'Taking all the credit'
by Irene Bayliss, independent consultant

A new project office manager took over an existing PMO team but was reluctant to build the team up to the next level to protect his own career. The PMO manager took all praise due to the team, but no support mechanism was in place to handle any failures.

The problem with such a situation is that the morale of team members can drop as they recognise what is happening and they have no access to the upper management levels. It does ultimately require senior management to understand that it is a team that delivers, not one person. This is what happened in this situation.

To help influence senior management, team members tried to ensure that the stakeholders and project team members were given as much information as possible without trying to undermine the manager's position.

'The resistor'
by Steve King, Director of Rakiro Consulting Ltd

As a consultant coming into an ongoing business-change delivery programme, it is quite common to encounter individuals resistant to change and unwilling to engage in shaping a fresh delivery approach. However, there will be stakeholders who recognise this as they have already made the decision to bring you on board to seek a fresh solution to turning around the failing project.

You need to focus on the desired outcome. Can you foresee a successful delivery team that includes the resistor, or will he or she continue to be a significant obstacle to the success of change? If the former is the case, then embark on a strategy to win them over through intensive engagement and detailed discussion. Focus on why you believe the change to be right, together with objective rationale that supports your case. Use their peers to assist by opening up the discussion with like-minded people to increase peer pressure. Gain agreement with key stakeholders – in particular with your supporters – to increase the authority of the change. If all else fails, and you are certain that the resistor will not come on board and is causing significant issues, then you are better off addressing him or her head on.

'The backdoor dealer'
by Patricia Henry, MA, PhD

The project manager was required to deliver a billing solution across multiple businesses in multiple countries for a global telecommunications company, with its hq in England. There was a single supplier, and a successive roll-out plan based on legal and regulatory requirements for each of the businesses from Asia, to the Caribbean, and then to South America.

Each of the individual businesses wanted prime solutions and first roll-out options. While the project manager was trying to gain support from the governance team for the schedule, the sponsor was making side deals with the individuals on the governance team for different delivery timeframes and supplier options.

Only during the governance meetings would the project manager find out about the side deals and then have to continually re-negotiate the project plan and supplier options with all the members.

This eventually begin the grave decline and eventual death of the global project, while the individual businesses pursued their own billing solution options at a greater cost and longer timeframes than those negotiated through economies of scale at the global level.

Decades of experience

The PMT trouble-shooting panel members have decades of experience dealing with different characteristics of team members. Please write and tell us of your experiences, or issues, and we are happy to explore the successful ways in which to overcome problems and deliver the project. Email the Editor, Ken Lane:
klane@projectmanagertoday.co.uk