Correcting People Problems Requires Preparation

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Let’s face it; sometimes we just don’t get the cooperation we need. To lead our way past problems where people don’t do their part, we need to prepare for the possibility in advance.

We have all experienced a situation where someone we counted upon to help us let us down. We have all been that person, too. In the realm of business and process performance improvement, we have that problem often. The reasons are many.

Many times, people don’t mean to let us down, but are simply given too many responsibilities or tasks and too many priorities. Sometimes people aren’t committed to the changes we are driving toward and, therefore, don’t produce the effort or follow through we need. Sometimes people just plain resist.

Regardless of the cause, as change leaders, we can’t afford to have team members fall short of following through. The fight to effect change is difficult enough when our projects succeed. Failed efforts just give resistors and those “on the fence” more reason not to commit to the new way.

I like a quote from Nicollo Machiavelli’s philosophic essay, The Prince. “It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, more dangerous to manage, than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institutions, and merely lukewarm defenders in those that would gain by the new ones.”

I don’t share his insight to frighten us from trying to institute new ways. I only wish to affirm the difficulty of the task recognized by an innovative thinker of the turn of the sixteenth century. I like the quote for another reason. Imbedded within it are clues to the success of such unlikely programs. Namely, the elements to

successfully driving change are planning, and managing the institutionalization.

I have written before about planning and managing the institution of a system, and I will write more. For now, let's focus on planning and managing the committed participation of team members on our improvement projects.

Naturally, the best way to manage fallout from team members who disappoint is to prevent the phenomenon. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as true control, and that is especially true when it comes to people. Our best efforts to prevent disappointment cannot guarantee it won't happen. We must be prepared for the fallout if the disappointment occurs. Fortunately, the two efforts are basically the same.

To build a plan to prevent and manage we must understand the causes so we can address them directly. There are many, but we can simplify the list into a short group of categorical phenomena.

- Resource shortage (people are overcommitted or given conflicting priorities)
- Uncertainty or shortage of faith
- Resistance

Let's address each one. Project and program managers, who mentored me through my various efforts, or to whom I turned when I needed help, taught me the methods I'll describe. They are tried and true, and many will be familiar. Don't dismiss the insights because they appear known already. The important message is that we must proactively address the three above phenomena. What I offer are some ways to do so.

Ideally, we want to hand-pick our teams for difficult projects. Sometimes they are assigned to us or we must accept personalities because of unique skills or experience. We are lucky to have passionate volunteers ask to participate. Regardless, there is significant risk of resource or time commitment conflicts.

No matter how we get our team members, be very clear and deliberate, in written form, concerning the expectations of time commitment we need or expect each team member to produce. Talk it over first. Arrive at an understanding and then follow up with a written summarization. In some environments it is appropriate to create a written agreement complete with signatures. There can be power in contracts.

Go at least one step further. Ask your team member to clear the commitment with his/her leader. Get confirmation that he/she did so. Also, inform your team member that you will share your written agreement with his/her leader to ensure that there is no misunderstanding.

Do it in a way that is not threatening. Make sure that your team member understands the reason is to make sure that his/her leader also agrees to the terms and will commit to ensuring that the team member is enabled to keep his/her

commitment. You are keeping the resource-management booby trap at bay, not showing a shortage of trust. Make sure this is clear to you and to your team members.

Do not cc your team member's leader on an e-mail containing the written agreement for time and deliverables. We must not expect our leaders to promptly read and digest every, single e-mail, much less the ones directed at someone else and not specifically to them. Talk with or meet that leader directly and go over the e-mail or printed agreement. Get a commitment.

If or when the commitment starts to fall off or break down, we can have a meaningful conversation to correct the problem. Of course, this means that we must also be engaged and following through with the assignments and expectations we issue our team members. We have set an expectation, both with our team members and with their leaders that time and effort will be committed. Professionalism dictates that they should tell us if that agreement must change, ideally before it changes.

So, if our team member is unable to provide the time and effort committed, we can talk to them. Seek first to understand the problem. Is it temporary? Has the team member and his/her leader already addressed it and produced a solution? Try to help your team member address the problem between the two of you first.

If the problem is not just a hiccup or is not addressed, offer to go with your team member to talk with his/her leader to resolve it. Be polite and respectful, but remind the leader of the commitment and ask for help to resolve the problem. Be helpful, not demanding.

If the team member's leader cannot help you resolve the problem, it is time to go to your own leader and ask for help. Give your leader, if you haven't already, a copy of the written agreement to work from. Sometimes, if two leaders work together to re-set expectations on their mutual resources for an effort that is important, they can arrive at a solution and save your project.

In the course of addressing what appear to be resource conflicts that affect your project, we will learn that the problem isn't really a resource problem so much as a motivation or understanding problem. Accept it; doing new things or being part of making change can be uncomfortable and even confusing.

I say "accept" it because there is a significant difference between lack of effort because of a lack of comfort or a lack of clarity or understanding, and outright resistance. A team member with the former can be redirected and salvaged. A team member with the latter must be overcome.

If you suspect that motivation, clarity, or understanding, are an issue with your team member's follow through, ask a great many questions. Instead of asking, "Why isn't this done," which will put your fellow on the defensive, ask questions such as, "what makes this difficult," or "what are your concerns with the task or role?" Ask questions that are focused on the assignment or the problem, not on the

person. You are much more likely to get responses that will lead you to the misunderstanding or the confidence issue.

By all means, address your team members' challenges, questions, and concerns. Remember that you have them on your team because you need their skills and experience. When they speak from that experience, it is in our best interests to listen. They might very well have a point and identify a real roadblock we must overcome.
It is OK to tell your reluctant or uncertain team members, "please just try it and see." A leap of faith is sometimes required. Just be sure that you have genuinely listened to their concerns first, and be compassionate. A flippant, "do as I ask," will not serve you.

Sometimes, while trying to mentor or manage a team member through their discomfort we decide that the problem isn't really a resource issue or an understanding issue; it's resistance. The person just doesn't want to participate or doesn't believe in the change and doesn't want to see it come to fruition.

To deal with resistance, I prefer a direct, but compassionate approach. Fortunately, if we have taken the actions described for dealing with resource conflicts and understanding issues, then we are prepared to deal with resistance. Confront your team member about it.

To confront them, use language that centers the problem on your own perceptions or beliefs rather than accusing your team member. "I feel like you don't really want to do this. Why?" Listen to the answers. They just might have a very good reason that you or your plans have not addressed.

If they confess that they do not believe in your plans and don't want to participate, take the conversation toward solving your problem. Remind them that you are counting on their participation and your project, performance evaluations, and job are depending upon your effort's success. Ask for their help in ensuring your continued success without them.

The conversation will get sticky, yes. No one wants to go in front of his/her leader and admit to being a force of resistance after you have a written agreement for participation. (Hopefully, you weeded out your resistors when you attempted to get the written agreement and it never comes to this, but sometimes it will) Offer to go with the individual to his/her leader and explain that your team member does not want to participate on the project any more.

It is best to go together, I hate to say it, so that whatever is said isn't directing the problem entirely on your own shoulders. If it's not in the cards, then it is best to ensure that you get your own conversation with the (hopefully ex-) team member's leader. Don't get caught in a blame game. Try to keep the conversation focused on the resource problem instead of the person problem. If a discussion of perceptions and accusations is unavoidable, stick to "I feel," or "I believe" in your testimony and present supporting facts; avoid speculation.

Sometimes the resistance comes from your team member's leader, and your team member is caught in the middle. Take the same approach. Confront that leader directly, in the same way and ask for help resolving the fact that you had an agreement that you now perceive he or she no longer wishes to support. Don't be afraid to involve your own leader in this discussion if you want or need the support. In any case, focus on solving your project's need. Do not get caught up in accusations, justifications, or blame. While the latter is tempting because of our frustration, it won't get us the support or manpower we need.

The most sinister form of resistance is the passive-aggressive sort. That is when your team member says he or she is on-board, supports you completely, and will do what is needed, but his/her actions don't reflect the words. People do this when they don't really want to participate, but aren't willing to say so, or don't have an alternative because they are expected by those around them, particularly their leaders, to be in complete support.

I say it's sinister because the words are all the right ones, but our projects are sabotaged by the sentiment and lack of follow-through. It makes it hard to identify and diagnose, and also hard to confront. Do all of the above. Chances are, the process of getting written agreement to participate on, and commit to, your project gave these resisters the "heebie-jeebies" from the very beginning and they sought an escape before becoming trapped on an effort they don't wish to support.

If the proactive commitments don't weed them out, and the rest of the confronting conversations don't bring it out so you can deal with it directly, then there is one last thing we can try that will either get us through or bring the truth to the surface. We can get very specific. Leave no room to wiggle out of completing assignments.

Make expectations and assign tasks that are very concise and clear with exact completion criteria and times. Get agreement that the tasks and times can and will be completed. If the excuses start to fly for why the work or due date isn't possible, then we turn right back to square one, which is addressing why the resource agreed upon suddenly isn't available, and discussing if the leaders need to get involved.

I find that it's generally better to get a resister off of the team than it is to expect that resister to suddenly change colors. Some people never change their beliefs or sentiments. Those who will are more likely to do so because everyone else is succeeding and they want to succeed too. They generally don't do it while leading the change. The best way to get a resister off of the team is to offer them a dignified way out.

No matter if the problem is a resource conflict, uncertainty, or outright resistance, the process for dealing with it begins with that agreement, and a record of that agreement at the time the person joins the team or the effort. Here is a very important thing to always keep in mind. As leaders of projects, it is in our own best interests to ensure that our team members succeed. This must be the impetus behind all of the resource negotiations and written agreements. It must be the underlying current of every conversation. Make it your mantra.

Our aim is to prevent problems. It is not to set traps. Resource problems occur and our documentation helps to keep us, and others, stay on the same page about expectations and commitments. Confusion and uncertainty is expected and we must deal with it by addressing concerns. Resistance is the phenomenon that sets its own trap. Sometimes the best thing for your own stress and for your project and team is to let a trapped person escape with some dignity remaining. Fear not, they won't make the same mistake with you again.

Planning to prevent resource conflicts, confusion, and resistance requires some forethought. Preparation for the possibility or eventuality helps us deal with the problems quickly and effectively when they do crop up. Pointing fingers and casting blame does not solve the problem and it doesn't improve your reputation or effectiveness. Generally it hurts in the long run. Give yourself the advantage of preparing for trouble so that you can deal with it expediently by clearly defining expectations and recording agreements.

Stay wise, friends.

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