



TenStep Supplemental Paper

9 April 2004

Turning Around a Dysfunctional Project Team

Every project faces certain obstacles, but sometimes it may seem that the problems are insurmountable. If you feel like your chances of success on a project are unclear, you could look at the situation in two ways. One way is to consider yourself on a train that is heading for a certain wreck. If you are thinking of the project this way, then the best actions to take may be to minimize the damage, see what can be salvaged and try to keep from having the company throw too much good money on top of what has already been spent. You might be considered a hero in some circles if you recommend canceling the project.

On the other hand, there are project managers that are known as turnaround artists, and they love to take over projects like yours. In fact, for many of them, the worse shape the project is in, the better they like it. There are people like this at all levels. You probably are aware that there are CEO's whose expertise is to turn around companies that are in terrible shape.

The project may be such that it must be completed regardless of the cost in terms of dollars and human relationships. Let's assume for now that you will try the later course of action – the project turnaround.

First assess the situation

The first thing you want to do is assess the current state of the project. This includes the project schedule and the project team dynamics. Your response to the project team problems will first depend on where you are at with the schedule. If you have 30 days of work remaining on the schedule, you will have less ability to make an impact on the team. In this case, the best course of action may be to try to motivate the team for the final push and watch the schedule like a hawk. On the other hand, if your project has many months to go, then you need to see what can be done to repair the damage on the team as well as replan the schedule to deliver on a new realistic timeframe. Any plan is going to include the following items.

Communicate well. Have you been on a project where the project manager is a poor communicator? This trait usually results in a miserable project experience for everyone. Teams with poor morale tend to have poor communication channels. Don't let rumors and uncertainty fester. Make sure you share as much information as you can about the project status and anything else that may impact the project team. There is hardly any time when over-communicating is a problem. In your case, it can do nothing but good.

Praise and compliment. When people on your team do a good job, make sure they know it. People don't expect money or gifts when they do a good job – just a pat on the back and a 'well done' by their manager. Give it to them – both informally and formally. Another cause of negative morale is poor or no positive feedback or recognition.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Set clear expectations. People like to understand what is expected of them so that they know the challenges they need to meet. They want to see the dragon and slay it. Make sure you give clear instructions when you hand out work so that people understand what they are expected to do. When you hand out work assignments, give a deadline date. When a team member is creating a paper deliverable, like a testing plan, give guidance on how it should be prepared.

Don't overcommit your team. As you try to improve morale, you also need to be careful not to overcommit the team. Determine what exactly is required to finish the project, and remove anything that is extraneous or can be done after implementation. Make sure you manage scope tightly, and try to defer all changes until after the original project is completed. Poor morale can cause your team to miss deadlines, which causes more pressure and degrades morale even further. The opposite is true as well. If the team can start hitting some interim deadlines (and you communicate this fact and praise them), the team morale should improve, which may make it easier to hit your next deadline.

Summary

These are some ideas for turning the project around. First, make sure you understand where you are in the schedule so you know how much time you have to make significant changes. Also, make sure you try to identify as many team problems as you can, as well as the root causes, if possible. Then, put together an action plan based on how much work and time is remaining on the project. If there is not a lot of time remaining, focus on the schedule. If a lot of time is remaining, focus on repairing the project team, as well as completing the schedule. There are many areas to look at as a part of repairing damage to the project team. Communication, timely performance feedback and clear expectations will be a part of every turnaround plan. Then, go out of your way to start building some successes – even interim ones. These general ideas, as well as others that you will identify, will give you a fighting chance to turn things around. Who knows, if you are successful and you enjoy the challenge, you might be known as a turnaround artist within your own organization.