



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Dealing With a Secretive, Distant Team Member

A project manager once said that his job would be much easier if only he did not have to deal with people. Some of the biggest challenges on a project are not managing scope or risk, but effectively managing and working with people. Let us talk about a person that has decided that they not longer want to be a part of the team. He or she may try to keep knowledge to himself or herself. He or she starts talking negatively about the company and the project. He or she may request to start working from home or different hours from the rest of the team.

Your first thought may be that the person needs to be fired, or replaced. But that is not always practical. Even if it was, there are some things you need to do first to make sure you understand the problem and what the impact to the project will be.

Assess and Manage Project Impact

First, let us look at this from a project perspective. The question here is to determine the impact this person's behavior is having on the project. Let us assume that the person's behavior is actually causing a problem today, or else you are concerned about a future risk to the project. After determining the person's impact to the project, you can invoke the appropriate project management response. Let us look at a couple of examples.

- If the person is missing their due dates, your project may be impacted and you may need to invoke issues management. In this case, you identify the problem, look for resolution, and bring these to your sponsor and your manager for assistance in choosing the best form of response. Part of the issues resolution process will be to engage the member in determining the cause of the missing dates. These factual examples will also help you if you have to deal with this later as a performance problem.
- If he or she is keeping knowledge to himself or herself, you have a definite project risk. There is a risk the person will leave before the project is completed. There is a risk that a proper transition to support will not occur. There is also a risk that the project will not be successful because information is not flowing through the team as it should. To mitigate the risk, you need to put some specific activities into place. These might include project activities for forcing some cross-training. You should also look at assigning specific deliverables to document the pieces of knowledge that the person has that others need to know. Again, if the activities are not completed successfully, you have ammunition for a potential performance problem.

Discuss the Situation

While managing the project impact, you should have a frank performance discussion with the team member. In this discussion, you can give your perceptions of his or her performance level, and try to get into a productive discussion about the cause of the problems. If you know the causes, you might have some ability to help fix them. In many



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organizations, the project manager is mostly responsible for the management of the project. A functional manager still may be responsible for overall people performance. If that is true of your organization, then you will need to enlist the help of the functional manager to take this step. It may, in fact, be the functional manager that attempts to deal with the problems at this point.

If there is a personal animosity between the team member and you, having a direct conversation can be very difficult and may require some prior coaching from the functional manager or from Human Resources.

There may be a reason for the person's behavior. You may discover something that may be causing the behavior problem, and there may be something that can be done to resolve the situation. For instance, the person may be afraid of being laid-off, and this may lead to their belief that they must become as valuable as possible, even if that means hoarding knowledge.

Get Advice from the Experts

If you cannot resolve the problem through project management or people management processes, then you need to go to your Human Resources (HR) department and get their advice. Again, in your organization, this may require you to go through a functional manager first. HR is probably going to be interested in your perspective, but they will also want facts, such as when the person has missed their due date, what negative comments were made, to whom, etc. That is why you need to understand the project impact from the first step above and start collecting facts. When you engage your HR staff, you must be prepared to follow their advice. They may talk to the person directly, or they may work in concert with you and the functional manager. If the situation cannot be resolved, and if there is a project impact, then the team member may find himself or herself on a performance plan and ultimately they may be fired. However, at that point, it will not be your doing, but choices that they make.

Summary

In summary, there are a number of things that are within your control to deal with problem team members. First, understand the impact of the problem behavior on the project, and try to utilize project management procedures to resolve the problems. Second, deal with the performance using people management techniques. This may be your responsibility, or you may have functional managers to call upon for help. Lastly, call in the professionals from your Human Resources Department. They deal with problem people every day and should have some processes to put into place to resolve the situation one way or another. If it comes to that, deal with the problem objectively and unemotionally, and follow their guidance exactly. They are the experts in performance management.

In any case, you must do something. Even if your project limps along and ends successfully, the troublesome team member will be somewhere else next. If you do not attempt to resolve this, the behavior will only burden another project manager in the future.