



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Responding to a Project Manager that Makes Bad Technology Decisions

It can be a problem if the project manager does not have as strong a technical background as members of the team he or she is managing. This situation comes up on many IT projects, to different degrees. A person said once that his technical skills started to become stale the day he became a project manager. While it is certainly true that no one can be proficient in all of the technical skills around today, most project managers start to lose some of their prior technical depth. This should not be surprising, since the project manager is now learning new skills in how to plan, manage, and control project work.

Even if the project manager has a good grasp of the technology, it is unusual to have technology decisions made by one person. Usually, there is a process in place to evaluate different options and then make decisions on which way to go. A decision that is not based on technical expertise may be completely arbitrary, but it also possible that another set of factors is influencing the decision-making process.

Understand Why the Decision was Made

The first thing you should do is to have a discussion with the project manager to find out what his or her decisions are based on. Do not accuse the project manager of screwing up on the project; rather have a rational discussion to determine what criteria the technical decisions were based upon. There are many factors that could come into play, including:

- **Existing company architecture.** Many times the best technology is not used because the company already has an overlapping technology. For instance, your company may have a standard DBMS. Chances are, that is the DBMS you will use, regardless of some specific reasons why another one might be marginally better for your project.
- **Cost.** Sometimes the company and project cannot afford the best technology, and will go with something that may not be as strong, but is affordable.
- **Integration.** Sometimes there are compromises made on technology because you know it has to integrate with other existing technology. The best solution may not be able to integrate as effectively.
- **Future considerations.** The technology may seem wrong today, but perhaps there are reasons why it will be better in the future.

Discuss Alternatives and Implications

Once you understand how the technology decision was made, you have an opportunity to discuss alternatives if you still think your solution is more viable. You should help the project manager understand the impact of their decision on the project today, as well as the concerns you have for the future. Perhaps if you explain the implications of the technology decision, the project manager will understand your concern and agree with your alternative. Again, the discussion does not have to be threatening. Just remember not



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to mix facts and opinion. You may find that much of your concern is based on your opinion about the implications of the wrong technology decisions. If you have backing from other team members, the opinions carry more weight. But they may not be facts.

Raise a Formal Project Risk

Next, you can raise this concern as a project risk. As such, you can formally explore the consequences of the technology decision and work with the project manager to put a risk plan in place. This again raises visibility to what you consider to be the wrong decision, and gets everyone thinking of the consequences. One of the risk contingencies may be to choose a different technology, but there may be other activities available to mitigate the risk you see so that it does not harm the project. Of course, this assumes your project is using some formal risk management techniques. If not, your ability to raise a formal risk is limited.

Escalate

Lastly, there is usually an escalation option. You can take the matter to the functional manager of the project manager. The most drastic action is to take the concern to the customer sponsor. In either case, you need to really have your facts straight and feel strongly. Obviously, you cannot take this step lightly. But, if you feel the success of the project will be in jeopardy, you may end up here.

Summary

In summary, you don't have the ability to deal with this problem as well as if you were the project manager and had a concern about decisions a team member was making. Your first obligation is to talk to the project manager and determine his or her criteria for making the decisions. Then, use the opportunity to see if you can convince him or her that your idea is a better way. If this discussion ends unsatisfactorily, try to raise the concern as a project risk. Lastly, there is an escalation path you can follow to see if people in a position of more authority will intervene.