



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Personal Relationships Can Impact Project Success**

Many companies have a specific policy against relatives working on the same team or in the same department. In fact, some companies will not even hire a relative of someone already on the staff. However, there are times when people meet at work and develop a relationship. Many companies frown on this, but most don't take any opinion one way or the other. However, once a personal relationship develops, the companies typically try to separate the couple into separate teams or departments.

There are times, however, when a personal relationship will begin on a project team, and it may not be practical to separate the members. You may need both of them on the team, at least in the short term. If you are in a situation where you are managing people who have a personal relationship, you must first hope that the people stay professional while at work. When a couple is getting along, that is normally not a problem. If the relationship shows up at all, it is usually in a positive context that does not harm the rest of the team.

However, there are situations that come up where that best-case scenario does not work out. Sometimes team members with a personal relationship start to have problems. This could be a temporary setback in their relationship, or it could be a sign of the relationship ending. If the couple was married, it could result in divorce. Again, there can be a silver lining to this. The end of the relationship may be amicable for both parties, and the relationship may not effect the work environment at all.

Of course, all of these prior examples describe situations where the relationship is under control, and is either positive or neutral in regards to the team. Of course, none of these cases are interesting enough to write a paper about. The problem comes in when you have a couple with a personal relationship that deteriorates and starts to affect the project team negatively. This is a situation that the project manager cannot ignore.

Breaking a relationship can be a stressful situation for both parties, and it can result in extra stress for the entire team, including the client. At that point, it no longer becomes a simply a personal issue, but becomes one that needs to be addressed and resolved for the good of the entire project and project team.

#### **Projects Already Have Built-in Stress Levels**

It is not uncommon to encounter personnel concerns on a project. Sometimes people don't get along. Sometimes the stress of long hours will cause normally friendly people to bicker. In fact, a behavioral consultant often said there should always be a little conflict to at least show that people had some emotional attachment to what they were doing.

This situation is different because of the very personal nature. Another consultant once said that people will take advice from just about anyone - except their spouse. In fact, that is one of the reasons why most companies don't allow people in a relationship to work



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for, or with, each other exactly. There is a potential for personal and business life to get intertwined. This is hard enough when the personal side is fine. It can be distracting and disastrous when the relationship is not well.

### **Project Management Processes Are Not the Answer**

Theoretically, if the project was affected by this situation, it might be appropriate to raise an issue or a risk. However, from a practical standpoint, that is not going to work. It would be hard for you to raise a risk, and have the team and client dissect how the personal situation might be impacting the project. You can use words like issues and risk to begin the dialog for resolution, but these project management processes are too cold and impersonal to be used effectively in a situation like this.

### **The Project Manager Options**

The first course of action is to talk with the people involved. You owe it to the couple to talk with them first. This should be done individually. The discussion should be non-threatening, but should make it clear that the personal situation is impacting the team. The couple may deny it, but you should be firm that whether they agree or not, it is your perception that the situation needs to be addressed. The project manager should also be clear on the escalation process if the situation is not resolved. Make sure that you document the discussion and their responses.

At that point, the situation might take care of itself, and the couple may be able to deal with the problem. However, if you were not able to deal with the situation through your own discussion, you should quickly escalate the situation. This includes talking with your functional manager as well as your Human Resources Department. At this point, you should also be looking at staffing alternatives. If the couple is not able to get through this personal situation, they will ultimately need to be separated, and the project manager is going to need to make recommendations on how the project will deal with the staffing change. One possible outcome also includes removing both people from the team.

An extreme action that will be taken by some companies is to actually fire one or both of the people. After all, they are negatively impacting the project, and they have not been able to address the situation on their own. Some companies don't want to get into the game of figuring out who leaves the team and who stays, and they may not want to get into any liability problems that would result if it appeared they were favoring one person in the relationship over another. The company response may be to treat both people equally by firing both of them.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this paper is to show that when a personal relationship impacts a project, it can suddenly become everyone's business. That's not what you want. The project manager should first try to address the situation with both of the parties, but if that is unsuccessful, the project manager's options are very limited. If the personal touch is unsuccessful, the project manager should escalate the situation and start to look for staffing alternatives. When you escalate, your manager and your Human Resources Department might each try some type of intervention, but the project manager needs to be



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prepared for losing one or both of the people. The project manager should start looking at options for cross training current staff members, hiring new staff, looking for transfers, hiring contractors, etc. The project manager may not in a position to execute the changes unilaterally, but they should be prepared for the likelihood that the ultimate result of the bad situation is that one or both parties will be replaced.