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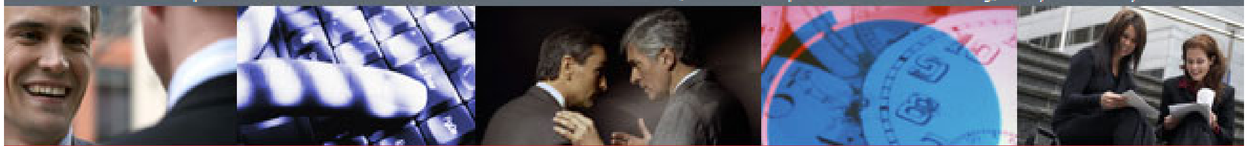

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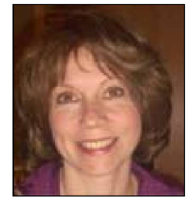
Project Management: Sticky Situations

by Doris Orr



Project Management: Sticky Situations is a series of articles which will outline some sticky situations in the realm of Project Management (which can be applied to general management settings). These situations, if left unaddressed, may certainly result in the early demise of an otherwise healthy/successful project.

This first topic in the sticky situations series addresses the dangers of negative conflict within the project team.

Definitions

The definition of conflict from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, is: "when two or more parties, with perceived incompatible goals, attempt to undermine each other's goal-seeking capability." A clash of various factors including priorities and directions often sparks a conflict. Even when we say that there is a potential conflict we are implying that there is already a conflict of direction even though a clash may not yet have occurred.

So … be on the lookout for a clash to avoid the eruption of a full-blown (unpleasant) conflict. How? Read on …

What's really going on?—listen beyond the "noise" to get the real facts.

A negative team environment—often felt or seen in team members' poor behavior towards each other—is the visible display and/or symptom of the underlying issue. Severe poor behavior is the human way of letting the bubbling volcano erupt when aggravated.

To get to the root of the problem, you'll need to data mine (a good actuarial phrase!), or dig beneath the surface, to find out the aggravations.

Why does conflict occur?

One of the best things about project work is the diversity that is (almost) always a major component in having the right project team. Project teams are commonly comprised of people from different parts of the business, each with a different background, expertise/skill set and reason for being involved in the project. In international/global projects, different cultures and languages can intensify the differences. This diversity, which can be the best thing about a project can also be the worst—or at least the trickiest—part of a fabulous project team.

The process of level setting—or, as my Swiss colleagues love to say "establishing a common understanding"—is absolutely critical in the early formative stages of setting up a team. The diversity, which is critical for the success of the project, needs to be respected and the commonality of the project's purpose needs to become the common foundation that everybody focuses on. The more solid this common foundation at the onset of the project, the better the chances of project success when inevitable obstacles arise.

Lack of clarity is another cause of conflict. If you've got a team of really motivated stars, but they don't have enough understanding as to their respective roles, this can cause many, many unnecessary clashes. Stars are often leaders, and naturally want to direct a project. Yet a project can only have one overall leader, and the star's role on a project may be perceived to be a subservient one that he or she has not occupied for many years. Clear understanding of deliverables, timelines, budgets, your project's guiding principles, and each person's level of autonomy are just some of the areas that need to be clearly defined and understood by all. Creating crystal-clear clarity in the planning phase may seem laborious (and to some it may seem like a waste of valuable time and energy), but investing in clarity around roles and responsibilities pays huge dividends as the project progresses. Believe me, I've learned the hard way that it is just not worth it to rush into the project deliverables without establishing these foundational rules upfront.

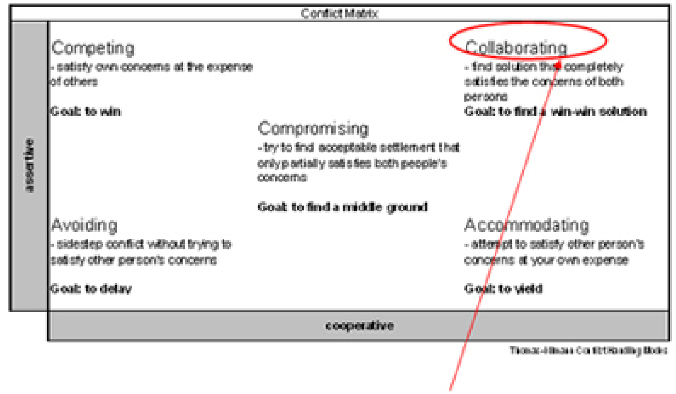
Differing measurement criteria of progress can also be a fundamental cause for conflict. Time and budget are usually the project manager's main concerns whereas 100 percent accuracy may be the only acceptable standard for the actuary on the team. This difference needs to be addressed upfront so that everybody agrees to the same success criteria.

Project delays caused by obstacles and/or poor planning are another big reason for clashes and ultimately eruptive conflict. Delays can unfortunately easily lead to finger pointing and "us and them" self-preservation tactics. No one wins with this approach but somehow people seem to feel better when they can play the blame game. NOT FUN, believe me!

The list of causes for conflict goes on and on…but this gives you some indications of the main drivers to eruptive conflict.

Ways to deal with conflict

The conflict matrix below (developed by Thomas Kilmann and used for the last three decades in conflict management) indicates various ways in which conflict is handled. You'll quickly see that some ways of handling conflict are less effective than others. Collaboration (win/win solution focus) is the optimal way to address conflict to ensure a healthy/enriched project environment. Accommodation and/or compromising may be necessary short-term ways to deal with acute team impasses, but will not sustain a healthy project in the medium- to long-term.



Resolving conflict within your project team—using win/win collaboration
Bring the troops together! Open up the floor to listen to frustrations! As project manager, create a safe harbor for team members to voice their frustrations; everybody has to be given the opportunity to voice their concerns. This process is a big part of the data mining that will uncover the root cause of the conflict. If you—the project manager—do not have the right skill set and/or rapport with the team to obtain this open feedback, then consider delegating this important assignment to someone you trust and that you know has the right skill set.

Remember, everybody wants to be part of a winning team
Use the root causes to develop the solution. Work together with your team to identify the best solutions to address the root causes of the clashes and the conflict. Here are some examples of solutions addressing root causes I've seen over my many years of project management:

* Silo approach/not understanding enough of the big picture for context. Solution: have periodic, i.e., bi-weekly project-wide, meetings so that everybody has a chance to understand how their piece fits into the bigger puzzle.
* Long-term project which seems to lose its intensity and excitement. Solution: identify and celebrate short-term milestones to get energy focused on sprinting (i.e., working hard for a short goal) and then rewarding this achievement. Make a big deal of the wins as this creates positive energy and excitement and cohesiveness for the team's win.
* Us/them blame game. Solution: create a communication forum (e.g., weekly meetings) of the heads of the respective us/them factions to solve project problems together.
* Problem focus. Solution: empower team members to offer solutions to each problem that they raise; reward this effort through acknowledgement even if the solution is not implemented.

Some final thoughts
Differences are healthy, but need to be carefully managed. Make your team's diversity a project strength, rather than the cause of your project's failure.

Focus on the common value proposition, i.e., the benefit, that will arise as a result of a successful project.

As an ongoing health-check, remind yourself what it felt like and looked like in the heat of the conflict crisis. If you sense that the project team is experiencing a clash and is headed in the direction of conflict again, then bring the troops together to sort things out before negative behavior starts to undermine your project again.

You may also wish to periodically ask some project members what their perception is of the overall project health and then proactively address the issues as they arise.

Look for the next article in this series in a future issue.

Doris W. Orr, CA, is SVP project director for XL Capital. Her passion is to add value and to help others get excited about adding maximum value in order to ignite their career paths. Through experience gained from running many projects—both large and small—and from working abroad for various years, Doris provides practical insights on how to increase your value—one second at a time. She can be reached at doris.orr@xlgroup.com.

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EAS Show 'n Tell!

by David Axene

The EAS Section is planning some exciting events in the coming month!

First of all, we are sponsoring a couple of webcasts where some of our members will share a few of their interesting activities—perhaps something a bit out of the ordinary for an actuary. Several Council members and other Sections' members will be involved. If you have something to share and would like to participate, please contact me at david.axene@axenehp.com and I will pass your information on to the organizers of the event. We will schedule the appropriate number of webcasts based upon both the interest in presenting and the interest in participating.

Another area we are exploring is a call for papers on entrepreneurial topics—with cash prizes for the top ones submitted. We are just beginning to plan this, but watch for more information in the next month or so. This will be in conjunction with a program of the University of Wisconsin and the 44th Annual Research Conference; extending this to EAS members with a specific call for papers on entrepreneurial topics was broadly supported by the Section.

As a Section we continue to identify areas where we can be of service to our members. The preferred vendor list is alive and well and continues to grow. Please continue to provide us with additional recommended vendors so we can build a robust list. We are sponsoring sessions at the Spring Meetings and also at the Annual Meeting this fall.

We welcome your suggestions and look forward to serving you. If you have ideas as to how we can be of better service to you as a member of the EAS Section, please let us know.

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Officers:
David Axene, Chairperson
Sandor Goldstein,

Visit our Web page for more information, or view past articles at our Resource Center.

And review special offers for our members at our Member Benefits page, from vendors recommended by other EA Section members.

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The Art of Communication: Eight Steps to Getting It Right

by Suzanne Bates

The art of everyday communications should be every professional's number one priority. Every statement and every communication must contain the elements connected to your practice's success, including its values, motivation, goals and objectives.

However, successful communication is not just about an idea, it's also about how it is articulated. These eight steps will get you there:

Step 1: Constantly keep communication lines open from within and outside your company—whether clients, employees, colleagues or vendors. Quick and responsive replies to all queries ensure that everyone is apprised of what's going on.

Step 2: Become your staff's most valuable resource. An open door or open phone line (or open e-mail box!) should be maintained so that staff or subcontractors can feel comfortable asking for help and sharing issues and problems. This second step is about responding to all communications without interfering in others' daily responsibilities, and prioritizing situations expressed in communications so that each communication can be handled as soon as possible based on its individual merits.

Step 3: Enforce acceptable behaviors. This powerful behavior insures that the value of communication will be recognized as well as the person doing the communicating. It also serves to express both appreciation and confidence in staff, subcontractors, business patterns and other stakeholders in the life of your business.

Step 4: Remain focused on client communications through the feedback loop by maintaining constant and open communications with each and every client. This level of communication should be customized according to the individual differences among your clients. Such a personalized nature improves retention, sustaining your company's advantage over your competitors.

Step 5: Support your staff and/or partners in learning to communicate effectively. Not every professional enjoys finely-tuned communication skills. Some need a coach or specialized training while others may not feel comfortable making presentations, therefore requiring help in overcoming stage fright. However, if not given the support they need, messages from you may be lost or

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not communicated clearly by others in your sphere.

Step 6: Overcome resistance to communications improvement. It's fundamental that everyone should be willing to hone his/her skills in effective communications. Failure to do so will result in miscommunications, missed opportunities, customer/client/staff dissatisfaction and failure to meet objectives. If a staffer, subcontractor or partner refuses to cooperate, it may become necessary to find a new one.

Step 7: Provide communications training for staff or partners. Varied levels can be made available beyond the basics. This can include motivational speaking, public speaking, media relations and effective listening/persuasion /influence. It may also be necessary to hire a communications specialist who will evaluate presentations and all other types of communications to see where the strengths and weaknesses lie. In turn, this person can advise, mentor and propose both changes and needed training.

Step 8: If your firm is large enough, organize a team of communicators that can represent the company. They should be actively involved within the company and visible to others at all times.

Successful communications cannot be achieved simply by expressing an idea. How ideas are communicated can make or break your practice. Open lines of communications must exist between all your stakeholders and colleagues so that success and communications become permanently and irrevocably linked.

Suzanne Bates is author of "Motivate Like a CEO: Communicate your Strategic Vision and Inspire People to Act!" (McGraw Hill 2009) and the best-seller Speak Like a CEO: Secrets for Commanding Attention and Getting Results. President and CEO of Bates Communications, www.bates-communications.com, she also writes The Power Speaker Blog www.thepowerspeakerblog.com.

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From The Editor: More Tools For The Executive On The Go

by Bill Ely

The article in our last issue regarding office and professional tools generated a lot of positive feedback. Several of you asked for more information, specifically related to keeping you productive while on the road.

I remember years ago, being frustrated that I had to carry a cell phone, a Palm Pilot, and my laptop when I traveled. Plus, I had a GPS navigation unit in my car. I remember saying that someone, somehow, some day would figure out how to combine all these into a single device I could carry with me to meetings, on customer calls, or even out to my backyard if I want to work there.

Well, that time has arrived. Many executives travel on client calls now with only a single mobile device in their coat pocket—everything else is left behind (or no longer exists). Note: these tools generally do not replace your desktop or even your laptop; look at them as extending the reach of your physical office wherever you go.

1. **Forward it.** Forward your office phone to your mobile phone. The quality of phones and signal strengths has dramatically increased in recent years. If you keep a professional voice mail message active on your mobile, your clients don't need to know you are taking their call from the beach. On a related note, several entrepreneurs (and homeowners) are totally foregoing a landline phone, opting to use only their cell phones. If you carefully select a carrier and plan (with plenty of minutes), many people find they save money by discontinuing their landline service.

2. **Sync up!** Sync your mobile phone to your office calendar and contacts so your most current information is always with you. This is not the same as finding a phone with a spot to enter your contacts and appointments—who wants to maintain this information in two places?! I like to maintain my primary calendar and contacts in MS Outlook on my desktop in my office and then sync that information with an application on my cell phone. Different phone and different carriers offer a variety of options to sync this information—either with a physical connection (docking station, USB cable, etc.) or wirelessly from any location getting a phone signal. This wireless option is especially valuable when someone else (like an administrative assistant) updates your calendar and needs to get the information to you and your device.

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3. **Use Google.** Similarly to syncing your phone with your office calendar, Google Calendar keeps your calendar on their Web site. You can allow others to view your calendar, perform some sophisticated searches (it's Google, remember!), and even set up automatic reminders, including mobile phone notifications. I know people who swear by all the Google applications.

4. **Cell phone e-mail.** More and more people are sending and receiving e-mail from their cell phone. Have you sat in a meeting lately where people are continually reading and responding to messages during the meeting? The jury is still out whether this is disruptive or productive. One note: if you plan to use your phone for e-mail, strongly consider a QWERTY keyboard. Most people get used to the small keys and strongly prefer it to the alternative where a single key represents three letters and you need to tap it multiple times to get right letter.

5. **Built-in GPS navigation.** Several wireless carriers (including Sprint and Verizon Wireless) offer a service which places an application on your mobile phone that approximates a separate GPS unit. I found the Verizon service to be easy to use and it includes the locations I need to find. I also like the fact that I can choose from a monthly subscription or just pay on an as-needed basis.

6. **Internet access.** Of course, many mobile devices now offer Internet access. Using your favorite browser, like Internet Explorer or Firefox, you can access almost any Internet site. Some sites accommodate for viewers on smaller mobile devices with screens redesigned to minimize use of the side or bottom scroll bar—which can be incredibly annoying when viewing a regular Web site on such a small screen.

7. **MS Mobile Office.** Preloaded onto certain cell phones, Microsoft's Mobile Office offers versions of MS Word, Excel, Outlook and PowerPoint. These familiar programs allow you to view and even sometimes edit documents on your mobile device. I typically don't use them to create new documents—the functionality is limited and can be a bit cumbersome with the smaller view—but this functionality has freed me from my laptop on many occasions. If you plan to use these programs, strongly consider purchasing a memory card to store your documents as most cell phones do not contain sufficient memory to store documents.

8. **Palm applications.** If you have a Palm phone, you can download literally thousands of programs. These programs are developed by Palm, as well as a host of other software vendors and even computer hacks who want to share the apps they have developed. Some applications are freeware and others are priced very reasonably. The Palm Store itself offers no fewer than 362 titles in the Professional category alone—applications ranging from Pocket Quicken to lots of calculators to mileage trackers.

Many of us have PDAs, smartphones, Blackberries, etc. that we carry with us. But, are you truly leveraging all the capabilities these devices have to offer? E-mail us at billely@wrely.com to tell us your favorite aid to help untether yourself from your office.


Bill Ely is director, Actuarial Services at Coventry Health Plan of NE & IA. Prior to joining Coventry in 2009, Bill spent 10 years as the owner / president of the actuarial consulting firm W.R. Ely and Associates, LLC.

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