Project Management Tales –
Who's the Boss?

By Debbie Gallagher

Each story in this series of Project Management Tales is true, but company names have been changed. Some stories occurred in Canada and others took place in the US or overseas.

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Background

Acme Corporation, a large established European company, was implementing a new system, including modules for general ledger, payables, procurement, sales orders, manufacturing, and receivables.

With a team needed to implement each module, there were several teams needed for the project. All of the teams could not be accommodated in the space that had been made available in one building.

The team leader for manufacturing was knowledgeable about the business requirements and already familiar with the product. In addition, the project manager felt this team needed less interaction with and support from the other teams, so the manufacturing team was chosen to be located in a separate building from the other implementation teams.

The Situation

The team leader for manufacturing did indeed turn out to be competent and capable of managing the team in a location separated from the others. She was able to assist the team with proper resolution of most issues that came up. In addition, she had a good understanding of which issues required input or approval from other teams and ensured they were involved in necessary decision-making.

The team leader called the project manager every day to report progress for the day and to ensure he was up to date on the status of all of the important issues related to the manufacturing team. She also made sure issues were escalated to him where appropriate.

The project manager was very pleased with his choice of which group to separate from the others. This team leader clearly was capable of running the team herself with little oversight.

What the project manager didn't realize was that the manufacturing team members no longer saw him as the person in charge of the project. He was assumed to be too remote and lacking insight into their issues.

The manufacturing team started to question the time that the team leader spent every day calling the project manager – they were fine on their own, why should she waste time keeping him up to date? They also questioned the need to escalate issues to the project manager – after all, what use would his input be, since he didn't know anything about what they were doing?

Action Taken

The team leader for manufacturing met with the project manager and told him about what she was noticing, that the manufacturing team was increasingly seeing her as the authority for anything related to the project, and didn't recognize his right to manage the issues that affected them.

The project manager was shocked. After all, he was always up to date and knowledgeable about the manufacturing team's progress and problems, due to the team leader's diligence in reporting to him daily.

The team leader suggested that the project manager take steps to become more visible to the manufacturing team.

The project manager started to visit the manufacturing team in the other building every day. He started with brief casual conversations with each team member. The project manager started to ask team members how the project was going and to discuss the issues and progress of the manufacturing team.

Epilogue

At first, the manufacturing team members were puzzled. What was the point of the project manager dropping by? Didn't he have anything better to do than to bother them with chitchat? However, as the project manager began to discuss progress and issues, he started to regain the confidence of the manufacturing team members.

After he had been visiting the site daily for a few weeks, the negative comments about the project manager were nearly eliminated. Instead, the team members started to agree that the project manager ought to be kept up to date daily, and that certain issues ought to be escalated to him.

It wasn't much longer before team members were comfortable with the project manager having input into some of the key issues facing the team.

Conclusions

Because of the efforts of the manufacturing team leader, the project manager was well informed about the progress and issues of the team. However, because the project manager was not visible to the team members, they did not see him as a having an understanding of their issues and successes.

In addition, they did not see that it was necessary to ensure the project manager was informed on key issues, so they could be considered in light of the needs of the entire project.

This could have become a problem, if the resolution of an issue had required that the project manager make a decision that over-ruled the preferences of the manufacturing team. For example, perhaps a decision would have to be made to satisfy the requirements of the project as a whole, but would be inconvenient for the manufacturing team to implement.

In the existing situation, the project manager would not be seen by the manufacturing team as competent to understand the issue and intervene for the benefit of the project.

Fortunately, the team leader recognized the problem and advised the project manager on what was occurring. Since the project manager was dealing with an existing visibility problem, he was wise to introduce himself gradually into the team's daily work. Since the team already saw the team leader as the authority figure, a more forceful approach by the project manager could have made matters worse.

Gaining the respect of the team members required the project manager to make a daily investment of time in getting to know the manufacturing team members and allowing them to get to know him as well. The amount of time he spent each day was small, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, and was time well spent. **TUG**

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[Debbie's previous "Project Management Tales" are available on her personal web site: www.gallaghers.ca/debbie.]