

Project Management Tales – Get Out of My Way



Debbie Gallagher

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.

Background

Acm Corporation, a manufacturer, was building a new data warehouse with multi-dimensional analysis and reporting capabilities. There were two main teams, one building the technical infrastructure and one developing the multi-dimensional cubes and reports.

The project was already underway when the project manager retired, and a new project manager was hired.

The Situation

At the first technical team meeting after the assignment of the new project manager, the team lead discovered that his team members had been trying a new approach instead of what had been agreed as the path to developing the technical architecture.

The team members explained that the project manager had decided that they should try a different approach. The team lead spoke with the project manager to find out why he had been left out of the discussion. The project manager was surprised. She had certainly not intended to leave out the team lead. She had been meeting with the technical team on another matter, and an informal discussion on the technical progress had come up and the change in direction had been agreed.

Action Taken

The team lead pointed out that once the discussion turned to alternative approaches, he should have been involved in the discussion. At the very least, he should have been informed of

the outcome, as it affected his work plan and his resources. The project manager hadn't meant to leave out the team lead, the new approach was a good one, and so what was the harm?

A few days later, the technical team lead was talking to one of his team members and discovered she was working on a different assignment. The project manager had approved the reassignment. The team lead met with the project manager, who explained that she had just bumped into the other project manager in the elevator. This had not been a formal meeting. The other project manager happened to have been short-handed, so she had agreed that the team member could help out. Again, the team lead protested that he had been left out of the decision and not been informed.

The project manager didn't think this was a problem. After all, the team lead had not been left out deliberately, it was just informal, and the decision was a good one, so why the concern? This pattern of events continued. It didn't take long for team members to bypass the team lead and start going straight to the project manager to resolve any requests or issues.

The team lead became extremely frustrated. Repeated meetings with the project manager did not correct the situation. So instead, the team lead just tried to keep up to date on what was going on with his team and understand the progress they were making. The technical lead disliked working this way, but his repeated discussions with the project manager had not corrected the problem.

Epilogue

The cube and report team started to have significant problems. The users had rejected the prototype cubes and reports. Significant re-design and re-work was required. Internal wrangling developed based on users and developers blaming each other for inadequate requirements definition. In addition, the cube and report team had a lot of difficulty in doing the re-work. This team now required a lot of time from the project manager.

As a result of the upheaval in the other team, the project manager was too busy to address informal questions about the technical team's work. The technical team lead kept the project manager informed about progress through the weekly status reports and meetings, but received no follow up questions.

The technical lead resumed control of his resources and plan, and the work proceeded according to plan.

As the cube and report problems were resolved and the project neared completion, the project manager congratulated the technical lead on a job well done. The technical lead pointed out that he had delivered the work with the appropriate quality on time, even though the project manager had been unavailable to interfere. The two laughed about the situation together.

On their next project together, the team lead met with the project manager at the beginning of the project. Since he had proven himself capable of leading his own team, they agreed that that


project manager would try very hard to avoid interfering. They met weekly to discuss progress, issues and explore alternative approaches.

Sometimes, the project manager slipped back into her old ways, but the team lead would remind her to stay out of the way – they could laugh together about it, and the project manager would back off.

Conclusions

There were a couple of interesting possible reasons for the project manager's behavior. First, she was new to the organization and felt a need to prove herself in the new environment. As a result, she was spending extra time getting involved in details to reassure herself that the project was going to succeed.

In addition, the project manager was a very easygoing, approachable person, so team members and other project managers felt comfortable chatting about their project issues and getting her involved. The project manager was usurping the authority of her own team lead. By doing so, she was working very long hours doing more work than she really needed to. She could have been focusing the whole time on output and issues, and instead got involved unnecessarily in the details of the technical team.

The project manager's approach caused a great deal of frustration for the technical lead. He had experience managing technical teams. He was capable of being responsible for managing the work of his team, but the project manager kept getting in the way. So, the team lead had the responsibility for getting the work done, but no real authority. 

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