What to Do when People Problems Threaten Project Success – Part 1

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Some of the most challenging problems on a project can often be "people problems." "People problems" are the social and cultural barriers that project managers face, such as resistance to change, departmental "silos," lack of cooperation and teamwork, inadequate communication, lack of leadership support, and politics and infighting.

This article is the first in a two-part series that will offer some practical approaches for dealing with "people" issues on projects. In this first article, we suggest preventive actions you can take prior to the start of a project. In the sequel article, we will present contingent actions you can take if problems of this sort occur during the project.

Part I: Preventive Actions

To reduce the likelihood of "people" problems on your projects, we will share four major preventive actions along with eleven planning tools that we have used with our clients successfully. The four critical preventive actions include:

1. Formally including cultural issues as part of project assessment and planning.
2. Creating a project structure that takes into account these cultural issues.
3. Building a strong communication and involvement strategy.
4. Carrying out continuous organizational development efforts in the organization.

The remainder of this article will describe the eleven specific planning tools that you can use to facilitate these four preventive actions.

1. Include Cultural Issues as Part of Project Planning

We have developed three tools that project managers use to formally include people and cultural issues in the project planning process. These tools include: 1) the Change Impact Analysis; 2) the Potential Problem Analysis; and 3) a formal cultural assessment that we call the "Readiness" Assessment.

Tool 1. Change Impact Analysis

The Change Impact Analysis deals with potential resistance to change. The purpose of this tool is to help the project manager anticipate the impact of the project on various stakeholder groups. Then the project manager can identify specific steps to deal directly with potential resistance to the changes brought about by the project. A Change Impact Analysis can be accomplished in a half-day workshop.

Tool 2. Potential Problem Analysis

Most project management approaches include an assessment of project risks. This phase of project planning is another opportunity for potential people and cultural barriers to surface prior to launching the project.

One popular risk analysis tool is the Potential Problem Analysis (PPA). The purpose of this tool is to identify potential problems that could affect project success and then help develop preventive and contingent actions. The project manager enters the identified preventive actions into the project plan along with "triggers," or precipitating events that would indicate the need for implementation of the contingent actions.

Tool 3. The Cultural "Readiness" Assessment

Tools 1 and 2 can be used on most projects, small and large. A Cultural "Readiness" Assessment, however, is used for major impact projects in which cultural and people issues are extremely important.

Organizations use the "Readiness" Assessment to identify their strengths and weaknesses as they relate to implementing the project. The organization then uses this information to design and plan the project in a way that will increase the likelihood of success. This tool focuses on leadership, teamwork, politics, staffing, attitudes, and other cultural factors.

2. Create a Project Structure That Takes Into Account Cultural Issues

We provide project managers three tools they can use to build a project structure that helps reduce people problems on projects. These tools include: 1) a carefully designed project organization; 2) careful selection of the key project personnel; and 3) a clear definition and description of project roles during the project initialization phase.

Tool 4. Guide for Structuring Your Project Organization

The purpose of this tool is to help project managers structure their project organizations in a way that works to overcome possible resistance, politics, and "silo" effects (lack of teamwork). From our experiences, we have discovered key principles to use in structuring a project organization that avoids many of the typical people problems.

Tool 5. Criteria for Selecting and Assigning the Right People to the Right Roles

Another way to help overcome possible resistance, politics, and "silo" effects is by assigning the right people to the key project roles. For the roles of project sponsor, steering team members, and project leader, pick people based on the specific criteria needed to ensure project success. Carefully select leaders of sub-teams and team members of sub-teams according to criteria that ensures engagement, facilitates cross-functional communication, and includes people with political clout in the right roles

Tool 6. Roles and Responsibilities Table

Clearly defined project roles help avoid later confusions or disagreements. The Roles and Responsibilities Table helps prevent misunderstandings and provides a way to settle turf battles ahead of time by agreeing and making explicit each person's role on the project, each person's responsibilities, and limits to authority.

3. Build a Strong Communication and Involvement Strategy

Poor communication and lack of stakeholder involvement is a recipe for misunderstanding, suspicion, and lack of "buy-in" and ownership by the very people who are affected the most by the project. These problems are surprisingly easy to prevent. We suggest that all project managers use the following two tools during the initiation phase.

Tool 7: Critical Issues Sessions

The purpose of critical issues sessions is to involve all stakeholder groups in the planning stages of the project. This type of session has two primary purposes: 1) to identify all possible issues, concerns, and questions prior to the start of the project; and 2) to involve stakeholders and get their "buy- in." Data collected during these sessions are used in project planning, project communication, and to possibly make changes in the project organization.

Tool 8: Communication Table

Using this tool will help alleviate the typical communication breakdowns that occur on projects. The Communication Table is a template that helps the project manager and the project teams produce a communication plan that is simple in format and easy to execute.

4. Carry out Continuous Organizational Development Efforts

The "healthier" the organization is (e.g., fewer "silos," better history of teamwork, better leaders, less politics) the less likely problems will occur on projects due to "people" issues. When organizational development efforts are continuous in an organization, we have found that the organization will be more successful in implementing projects.

The following three organization development efforts are not used as preventive tools for a particular project, but instead represent initiatives that will improve overall organizational effectiveness for all projects..

Tool 9: Guide to Ongoing Leadership Development

Continuous development of leaders in the organization has dramatic positive effects on an organization overall. From a project management standpoint, if the organization is continuously developing leadership potential throughout the organization, strong leaders will be available for specific project leadership. This guide provides several types of leadership development initiatives that can be implemented in an organization to improve the likelihood of the availability of strong project leaders.

Tool 10: Guide to Ongoing Teamwork Development

Continuous development of teamwork in an organization significantly improves overall organization effectiveness. From a project management perspective, if the organization is constantly improving teamwork, politics, "silo" effects, and turf battles on any specific project will be less likely to occur. This guide provides several types of teamwork interventions that an organization can carry out to encourage teamwork within the entire organization.

Tool 11: Guide to Ongoing Business Literacy

Organizations experience many positive effects when they improve the overall level of business literacy of their workforce. For example, the more business literate the workforce is, the less resistant it will be to change because employees have a context or background to understand the rationale for particular change initiatives. Likewise, the more business literate the workforce is the more adaptable or flexible the workforce becomes and the more job-involved and motivated they become. These effects will carry over to individual projects. This guide provides several specific components of business literacy that must be continuously shared and taught to employees to produce these positive effects.

Conclusion

The best way to deal with potential cultural and political problems that could affect project success is to take these factors into account during the planning phase of a project. By using the eleven planning tools we have outlined, you are less likely to experience people problems on your project.

Stay Tuned — Intervention Tools

Despite our best efforts to prevent them, your project may still experience resistance to change, teamwork issues and other cultural problems. In our next newsletter, we will present Part II of the series, which will give you seven tools for handling these types of problems if they do occur.

Preventive Tool 1: Change Impact Analysis	
When to Use	Feasibility stage or project planning stage
Purpose	Identify possible resistance to change brought about by the project, and then develop a plan of action for dealing with this resistance
Process Steps	First assemble a cross-functional group of stakeholders. Then facilitate this team to answer the following: 1. Who is impacted by the upcoming change? For each group: 2. How is the given group impacted? 3. When will the impact occur? 4. What new skills and behaviors will be needed to succeed? 5. What types of resistance will we see from the group? What are the barriers? What are the issues they will have? 6. What can we do to help this group adapt? What change management tool would be best for them? Finally, enter the agreed-upon actions (step 6) into the project plan and make assignments of responsibility, task duration, frequency and timing.
Time Investment	Half-day workshop

Preventive Tool 2: Potential Problem Analysis	
When to Use	Feasibility stage or project planning stage
Purpose	Identify potential problems that could affect project success, and then develop preventive and contingent actions. This tool does not directly address resistance to change, politics, teamwork or other cultural issues; however these cultural issues almost always surface during the exercise.
Process Steps	First assemble a cross-functional group of stakeholders. Then facilitate this team as follows: 1. Generate a list of potential problems that could hamper project success. 2. Evaluate each problem on likelihood that the problem will occur. 3. Evaluate each problem on the seriousness of consequences to the project if it did occur. 4. Prioritize the list by selecting those problems that are both likely to occur and would have serious project consequences if they did occur. For each prioritized problem: 5. Develop action steps to prevent the problem from occurring. 6. Enter the action steps into the project plan, making sure to assign task duration, responsibilities, and timing. 7. Develop a contingency plan of action if the problem occurs anyway. 8. Identify the event or metric that will "trigger" the implementation of the contingency plan.
Time Investment	Half-day workshop

Preventive Tool 3: Cultural "Readiness" Assessment

When to Use	Project Planning Stage
Purpose	Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization to carry out the project, and then use this information to design and plan the project in a way that will increase the likelihood of success. This tool focuses on leadership, teamwork, politics, staffing, attitudes, awareness of resources and other factors that will have an impact on how "ready" the organization is to carry out the project. Due to the sensitive issues dealt with, *this assessment is best carried out by an outside party*. This tool is used only for mission-critical, high visibility projects that will require a large investment in resources.
Readiness Factors that are Assessed	For an IT project there are 13 "readiness factors," as follows: 1. IT Skill Sets 2. IT Staffing 3. IT Experience 4. Comparable project experience 5. Project Management Sophistication 6. Teamwork 7. Team Process Sophistication 8. Team Leadership 9. Leadership Support 10. Experience with the new software 11. Attitudes toward the new software 12. Budget Awareness 13. Willingness to Backfill
Other Deliverables	Strengths and weakness of the organization to carry out the project (13-element profile); scope document, recommended project organization; recommended leaders; high-level project plan; first order-of-magnitude budget; communication plan, training plan, critical issues that must be addressed.
Time Investment	Usually six to eight weeks of elapsed time. Requires individual interviews with stakeholders throughout the organization.

Preventive Tool 4: Guide for Structuring Your Project Organization

When to Use	Project Planning Stage
Purpose	Provide guidelines for structuring a project organization that will help overcome possible resistance, politics, and silo effects (lack of teamwork)
Principles We Use when Coming up with a Project Structure	♦ Project structure for politically sensitive projects will be more elaborate than typical projects. ♦ Minimum characteristics include a project sponsor, a project steering team, a core team, and various sub-teams (we call them “focus teams”) as vehicles for both representation of stakeholder view and for tearing down organization “silos.” ♦ A project sponsor should be someone high up in the organization with a lot of clout and willing to settle disputes. ♦ The steering team should include various high level personnel needed to help resolve political issues. ♦ Core team members should be selected for competence, knowledge, and collaboration skills. ♦ Focus teams are led by people who have positive attitudes about the project. ♦ A diversity of views can be represented on the focus teams, but at least half the members of the teams must be positive about the project. ♦ Use advisory teams as an input device for involving important stakeholders who are not on the steering or core teams. ♦ Build cross-functional focus teams to help get people from different departments communicating and working together. ♦ The core team leader should be someone respected by most people in the organization.

Preventive Tool 5: Criteria for Selecting and Assigning the Right People to the Right Roles	
When to Use	Project Planning Stage
Purpose	Help overcome possible resistance, politics, and silo effects (lack of teamwork) by providing criteria for carefully assigning the right kinds of people for key project roles.
Criteria for Selecting People for Key Project Roles	***Project Sponsor*** – Political clout, willingness to make a decision and positive (enthusiastic) toward the project. ***Steering Team*** – Political clout, willingness to collaborate, and positive about the project. ***Project Leader*** – Respected by the organization, above average leader, positive about the project, willing and able to devote time required, good organization skills, understand the politics of the organization, some knowledge of project management, and has an "enterprise view" rather than a "silo view."
Criteria for the Leaders of the Various Project Focus Teams (sub-teams)	♦ Respected in the organization ♦ Capable leader ♦ Knowledgeable about project content ♦ Positive attitude toward the project ♦ Has time available (not overloaded with other activities) ♦ Supervisor consulted and endorses ♦ Enterprise orientation
Criteria for Team Members	♦ Knowledgeable about project content ♦ Diverse views are represented (try to put people with different views and backgrounds on the team) ♦ Supervisor consulted and endorses

Preventive Tool 6: Criteria for Selecting and Assigning the Right People to the Right Roles	
When to Use	Planning Stage of the Project
Purpose	Clearly define project roles in order to avoid later confusions or disagreements. A way to settle turf battles ahead of time by agreeing and making explicit each person's role on the project, each person's responsibilities, as well as limits to authority.
Description	A Roles and Responsibilities Table is simply a list of the key players that are involved on the project, followed by succinct statements of the duties and responsibilities they will have on the project. This is usually arranged in Table. For typical projects, the "key players" would be: 1. Project Sponsor 2. Project Leader 3. Project Steering Team 4. Implementation Team 5. Various Focus teams 6. Focus Team Leaders 7. Various Vendors
Process Steps	1. One or two key players (e.g., project leader, sponsor, project management firm, etc.) produces the first draft of the Roles table 2. The draft is then circulated to the steering team, focus team leaders, implementation team members and vendors for review and suggestions 3. Role table is revised, based on issues that surface 4. Final role table is then approved by the project sponsor

Preventive Tool 7: Critical Issues Sessions

When to Use	Planning Stage of the Project
Purpose	Involve all stakeholder groups in the planning stage of the project in order to identify all possible issues prior to the start of the project. Data collected with this tool are used in project planning, project communication planning, and to possibly make changes in the project structure.
Process Steps	1. Identify key stakeholders to be included in the session. 2. Send out a pre-work booklet prior to the session. The session itself: 3. Review the project scope document with participants and answer questions. 4. Record each critical issue raised by the stakeholders (there are four categories of issues: a) major tasks that must be carried out, b) concerns and dangers, c) questions that must be answered, and d) project assumptions that must be documented and validated). After the session: 5. The project leader, the project facilitator, and one or two other project members meet to analyze the critical issues that were generated. 6. For each major task generated, the group makes one of the following decisions: a. Incorporate the task into the project plan or communication plan. b. Decide the task is beyond the scope of the project. c. Refer it to the project sponsor for determination. 7. For each concern or potential danger, the group makes one of the following decisions: a. Use the concern as part of the potential problem analysis. b. Decide the concern is beyond the scope of the project. c. Refer it to the project sponsor for determination. 8. For each question that must be answered, the group makes one of the following decisions: a. Include the answer to the question as part of the project communication plan. b. Decide the question is beyond the scope of the project. Follow-up to Participants 9. Once all the critical issues have been addressed, send a copy of all the decisions to each of the participants in the critical issue session.

Preventive Tool 8: Communication Table

When to Use	Planning Stage of the Project
Purpose	Produce a communication plan that is simple in format, easy to execute, and that will help alleviate the typical communication breakdowns that occur on projects.
Process Steps	1. Identify all stakeholders that will be included in the communication plan. 2. For each stakeholder identify the kinds of information they must receive. 3. For each type of information needed, decide on when the communication will occur, how frequently it will occur, what communication method will be used, and who will be responsible 4. Arrange this information in a table format and post it *(see our website for an example)*. 5. Ensure that all questions from the critical issues sessions have been included in the communication plan. 6. The project leader and project team monitors the plan to ensure it is executed during the project.
Time Investment	The communication table can be completed in a half-day session with key project players.
Note	It is sometimes helpful to have the focus teams (sub-teams) put together their own communication table, consistent with the Communication Table for the project.

Preventive Tool 9: Guide to Ongoing Leadership Development	
When to Use	This tool is not related to a particular project, but instead to the organization's overall development.
Purpose	To continuously develop leadership potential in the organization in general, thus increasing the likelihood that there will be strong leaders available for any specific project.
Rationale	It is known that the "healthier" the organization is (e.g., fewer silos, better history of teamwork, better leaders, less politics) the less likely there will be a risk to a project due to "people problems."
Examples of Leadership Development Topics and Interventions	♦ Interpersonal skills development ♦ Management and leadership skills development ♦ Project management skills ♦ Communication skills ♦ Facilitative leadership skills ♦ Coaching and mentoring skills ♦ Group process and team development skills ♦ Essential leadership skills ♦ Succession planning system ♦ Performance management systems

Preventive Tool 10: Guide to Ongoing Teamwork Development	
When to Use	This tool is not related to a particular project, but instead to the organization's overall development.
Purpose	To continuously develop teamwork in the organization in general, thus increasing the likelihood that there will be less politics and more teamwork on any specific project.
Rationale	It is known that the "healthier" the organization is (e.g., fewer silos, better history of teamwork, better leaders, less politics) the less likely there will be a risk to a project due to "people problems."
Examples of Teamwork Development Programs	♦ Teamwork skills development ♦ Management modeling of collaboration ♦ Focus on the enterprise, not individual departments ♦ Increased use of cross-functional teams ♦ Frequent team-building interventions ♦ Structuring the reward system to be consistent/aligned with teamwork goals

Preventive Tool 11: Guide to Ongoing Business Literacy

When to Use	This tool is not related to a particular project, but instead to the organization's overall development.
Purpose	To continuously educate organization members about business goals, strategies, and direction, thus increasing the likelihood that there will be an understanding of the strategic importance of mission-critical projects, and therefore less resistance to change.
Rationale	The more business literate the workforce is, the less resistance to change, and the more job involvement and motivation
Business Literacy Factors	The organization should strive to ensure that everyone understands the following on an ongoing basis: ♦ Strategic goals of the organization (what the organization is trying to accomplish) ♦ Trends in the industry ♦ Needs of customers ♦ What the competition is doing <u>And for each job incumbent</u>: ♦ An understanding of the linkage between personal job performance and the customer experience ♦ An understanding of the linkage between personal job performance and the financial performance of the organization ♦ An understanding of the linkage between personal job performance and operational effectiveness