

What to Do when People Problems Threaten Project Success – Part 2

Edwin T. Cornelius III, Ph.D.

This article is the second in a two part series dealing with “people problems” on projects. In using the phrase “people problems,” we refer to various social and cultural barriers managers face on projects, such as resistance to change, departmental “silos,” lack of cooperation and teamwork, inadequate communication, lack of leadership support, and politics and infighting. These types of problems often present the most daunting obstacles to project success.

In our first article, we offered eleven practical preventive actions that the project manager may carry out during the planning phase of a project in order to avoid or at least mitigate the impact of these types of problems.

In this companion article we present options you can consider if “people problems” occur during the project and begin to impact negatively your progress, despite your best efforts to prevent them.

Part II: Interventions

If “people problems” occur once a project is underway, there are seven specific intervention tools that have been used to get a project back on track. These are:

1. Provide coaching and mentoring to key project personnel
2. Make a change in project personnel

3. Use a strong outside facilitator to mediate conflicts
4. Provide a personality-based teambuilding experience
5. Provide activity-based teambuilding events
6. Provide skills-based teambuilding sessions
7. Provide problem solving-based teambuilding retreats

The type of intervention tool used depends on the nature and severity of the people problems that threaten project success. These seven tools are explained below.

Tool 1. Provide Personal Coaching

This is the tool of choice when the behavior or attitudes of a particular project member is causing problems that threaten project success. The point of this intervention is to help the project member become aware of how his/her actions are a hindrance to project completion. The hope is that coaching will help change the behavior or attitudes of the project member who is holding up project success. The person doing the coaching can be the project leader, the project sponsor, the project member’s supervisor, or even a respected colleague. There are different possible coaching techniques and tools that can be used in this situation.

Tool 2. Make a Change in Project Personnel

This type of action is used only on rare occasions. This tool is used when the actions (or inactions), poor attitudes, lack of ability, or lack of

performance of a particular project member is causing problems that threaten project success, and several attempts to change the behavior have not succeeded. The purpose of this intervention is to remove someone from a project role so that we can quickly get over the problem and move forward on the project. There are four factors that must be considered before taking this type of drastic action.

Tool 3. Bring in an Outside Facilitator

When the project is in jeopardy due to politics, lack of teamwork, or other “people” problems, and when several attempts to deal with these issues have failed, it is often helpful to bring in an experienced third party, with no connections to the organization, to serve as an arbitrator and facilitator to help mediate conflicts so that the project may move forward. This is a form of a “project rescue;” however, the emphasis is solely on people problems. Using an outside facilitator is a fairly extreme remedy, and is used only with the most critical projects. Although the approach of the facilitator may vary, there are six general phases of an intervention of this sort.

Tool 4. Carry Out Personality-Based Teambuilding

This tool is used when a project team or sub-team is not performing well due to personality conflicts on the team. The purpose of this intervention is to help team members better understand each other, and thus learn how to work more effectively together. Many “personality conflicts” on teams result from differences in how team members perceive, make decisions and interpret and react to the same set of stimuli. Once these

differences are understood, the team learns that many “personality conflicts” are due to misunderstandings and “projections” of motives that are not necessarily true. They then can agree on codes of conduct for communicating and working together more effectively.

Tool 5. Carry Out Activity-Based Teambuilding

This tool can be applied when a project team is not performing well together due to any number of different symptoms, such as lack of trust, poor communication, and lack of teamwork. The purpose of activity-based teambuilding is to help team members learn how to work together in a series of challenging outdoor group tasks and exercises, and then to apply the lessons learned to working together on the project.



Activity-based teambuilding can be carried out in a variety of settings, such as “high” ropes courses, “low” ropes courses or various outdoor adventures. All these exercises require groups to learn to work together to achieve success.

Tool 6. Carry Out Skills-Based Teambuilding

This tool is the approach of choice when a project team is not performing well together due to a lack of understanding of how teams operate and/or a lack of teamwork skills. The purpose of this intervention is to teach team members specific teamwork skills and ground rules for operating more effectively together. In skills-based teambuilding, team members participate in workshop sessions that require them to learn and practice specific teamwork skills (e.g., dealing with conflict, reaching group consensus, learning how to give criticism, or running effective team meetings).

These workshops include skills that can be applied immediately on the project.

Tool 7: Carry Out Problem Solving-Based Teambuilding

Problem-solving teambuilding retreats are the most often used interventions on projects. The purpose of this tool is to remove the team from

its everyday setting and get the team to agree on the barriers they are having, analyze why, and then take ownership in the problems by agreeing on actions they will take to get back on track. In our experience this type of intervention has been quite successful in getting project teams focused, back on track, and more productive. Several steps must be followed when carrying out this type of intervention.

Summary

The seven intervention actions tools described above, when added to the project management toolkit, will help project leaders deal with the leadership, politics, teamwork, and resistance to change issues that typically drive up project costs, lengthen project schedules, and threaten project completion.

It is our belief that these seven intervention tools, along with the eleven preventive tools described in our earlier article (Part I), will make the project leader's job much easier to carry out.

Intervention Tool 1: Personal Coaching	
When to Use	When the behaviors or attitudes of a particular member of the project is causing problems that threaten project success.
Purpose	Change the behaviors or attitudes of a project member who is causing problems that threaten project success.
Coaching Techniques	<p>Problem Solving Method:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. State the issue in a way that comes across as though there is a problem that must be solved (i.e., this is not a personal attack) 2. Listen carefully 3. Get the person involved in coming up with ideas to solve the problem 4. Reach closure on a course of action 5. Follow-up <p>Persuasion Method:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Get the person's attention (appeal to a pet peeve or give an offer that can't be refused) 2. Make a specific suggestion 3. Show understanding for how difficult the suggestion might be 4. Sell the benefits of the change 5. Ask for commitment <p>Formal Coaching Method:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set the stage by stating the purpose of the conversation, the benefits of having the conversation, and the process you would like to follow 2. Listen first to the reaction and ideas of the person you are coaching and then carefully summarize what they say and how they feel 3. Express the areas that you agree and disagree 4. Work on the areas that you disagree in order to come up with a plan going forward
Time Investment	Anywhere from five minutes to thirty minutes

Intervention Tool 2: Personnel Replacement

When to Use

When the actions (or inactions), poor attitudes, or lack of ability of a particular project member is causing problems that threaten project success, and several attempts to change the behavior have not succeeded.

Purpose

Remove someone from a project role so that we can quickly get over the problem and move forward.

Factors to Consider

- ◆ Must be a problem person that is really hurting the project
- ◆ Must have tried coaching and counseling to no avail
- ◆ The project sponsor has been involved and the sponsor has talked with the project member's supervisor
- ◆ There is a person available that can step in and take over the project role

Intervention Tool 3: Strong Outside Facilitator

When to Use

When the project is in jeopardy due to politics, lack of teamwork, or other “people” problems, and when several attempts to deal with these issues have failed.

Purpose

Use an experienced third party, with no connections to the organization, to serve as an arbitrator and facilitator to help overcome these barriers and move the project forward.

This is a form of a “project rescue;” however, the emphasis is solely on people problems. Using an outside facilitator is a fairly extreme remedy, and is used with the only the most critical projects.

An outside facilitator may be used to help a single project team, or the facilitator may be used to help the project implementation team, steering team, or other critical project group that is not making progress due to leadership, politics, teamwork, or resistance to change issues.

Process Steps

The approach will vary depending on the facilitator. The steps below outline a possible series of intervention steps:

1. All parties agree that outside help is needed
2. All parties agree on the outside facilitator
3. Diagnosis is carried out by the outside facilitator
4. Ground rules are agreed upon, as facilitated by the third party
5. Recommendations of the facilitator are carried out
6. Outside facilitator continues to coach and monitor, as needed

Time Investment

Varies with the type of problem faced and the type of intervention recommended by the facilitator

Intervention Tool 4: Personality-Based Teambuilding

When to Use

When a project team or sub-team is not performing well due to personality conflicts on the team

Purpose

Help team members better understand each other, and thus learn how to work more effectively together.

Rationale

Many “personality conflicts” result from differences in how team members perceive, make decisions and interpret and react to the same set of stimuli. Once these differences are understood, the team learns that many “personality conflicts” are due to misunderstandings and “projections” of motives that are not necessarily true. They then can agree on codes of conduct for communicating and working together more effectively.

In addition to the above, the process of carrying out this intervention in a retreat setting often helps to generate some camaraderie and team spirit.

Process Steps

1. Team members fill out a particular personality inventory
2. The instruments are scored and interpreted by a facilitator
3. A one-day workshop is scheduled to go over the results and learn about each person’s personality profile
4. During the workshop, the facilitator guides the team through a series of exercises to help participants understand the unique differences on the team
5. The facilitator also helps the team agree on ground rules for respecting team member differences, and ground rules for communicating and working together based on these differences

Time Investment

Minimum is a half-day workshop; however, for best results a one-day workshop is recommended

Intervention Tool 5: Activity-Based Teambuilding

When to Use	<p>When a project team is not performing well together due to any number of different symptoms (lack of trust, poor communication, lack of teamwork, etc.).</p> <p>Also can be used when a team is in a “rut” and would like an experience to help “energize” or reinvigorate the team. Can also be used as an occasion to simply have fun together for morale improvement purposes.</p>
Purpose	<p>Help team members learn how to work together in a series of challenging outdoor group tasks and exercises</p>
Rationale	<p>Lessons learned in experiential outdoor group tasks can then be transferred to the work setting to improve everyday team performance.</p>
Types of Exercises	<p>Activity-based teambuilding can be carried out in a variety of settings, such as “high” ropes courses, “low” ropes courses or an outdoor adventure such as white water rafting, mountain climbing, or even a survival course or a boot camp.</p> <p>All these exercises require groups to learn to work together to achieve success.</p>
Note	<p>It is important to custom design the experiential exercises around specific development needs of teams, such as group problem solving, risk-taking, trust, or paradigm breaking.</p>
Time Investment	<p>These exercises can range from four to eight hours for a typical “ropes” course to two or more days for outdoor adventures.</p>

Intervention Tool 6: Skills-Based Teambuilding

<p>When to Use</p>	<p>When a project team is not performing well together due to a lack of understanding of how teams operate and/or a lack of teamwork skills.</p>
<p>Purpose</p>	<p>Teach team members specific teamwork skills and ground rules for operating more effectively together.</p>
<p>Rationale</p>	<p>The underlying philosophy with the skill-building approach is that the most likely reason groups don't work together well as a team is because they do not have the necessary skills. Thus, the obvious first step in building better teams is to have teams practice using teamwork skills in facilitated workshop settings, increasing the likelihood they will use these skills in the actual work setting.</p>
<p>Approach</p>	<p>In skills-based teambuilding, team members participate in workshop sessions that require them to learn and practice specific teamwork skills (e.g., dealing with conflict, reaching group consensus, learning how to give criticism, or running effective team meetings). These workshops include skills that can be applied immediately in the workplace.</p> <p>The teambuilding aspect of this approach is maximized when intact teams participate together and make commitments to use these new tools to improve the way the team functions.</p>
<p>Time Investment</p>	<p>The amount of time invested varies with the number of skills that need to be learned and the maturity level of the team. For example, team meeting skills and group decision-making and group consensus tools can be taught in a half-day workshop. Critical interpersonal skills such as giving and receiving feedback, dealing with criticism and conflict, listening, and teamwork styles can be taught in a two to three-day workshops. Group problem solving tools usually can be taught in one to two days.</p>

Intervention Tool 7: Problem Solving-Based Teambuilding

<p>When to Use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Anytime in the project when the team needs a “jump start.” ◆ Team is having trouble working together and getting things done ◆ Team members are not taking the time to work on the project ◆ Lack of cohesion or sense of purpose among the group ◆ Not making progress they should be making ◆ Team members are feeling overwhelmed ◆ Team members are frustrated because progress is not being made ◆ Not all team members are pulling their fair share of the weight
<p>Purpose</p>	<p>Remove the team from its everyday setting and get the team to agree on the barriers they are having, analyze why, and then take ownership in the problems by agreeing on actions they will take to get back on track.</p>
<p>Process Steps</p>	<p>During a one or two-day retreat, facilitate the team through the following steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List the barriers that are facing the team 2. Prioritize the barriers and select the most important to work on 3. Analyze each barrier in subgroups by analyzing causes, root causes, and actions steps that can be taken to remove or mitigate the barrier 4. Reach commitment to move forward and execute the action steps 5. Assign responsibilities and timelines 6. Follow-up on progress in subsequent project team meetings
<p>Time Investment</p>	<p>One or two-day retreat</p>

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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 (<i>see our website for an example</i>). 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

<p>When to Use</p>	<p>This tool is not related to a particular project, but instead to the organization’s overall development.</p>
<p>Purpose</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Rationale</p>	<p>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.”</p>
<p>Examples of Leadership Development Topics and Interventions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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

<p>When to Use</p>	<p>This tool is not related to a particular project, but instead to the organization's overall development.</p>
<p>Purpose</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Rationale</p>	<p>The more business literate the workforce is, the less resistance to change, and the more job involvement and motivation</p>
<p>Business Literacy Factors</p>	<p>The organization should strive to ensure that everyone understands the following on an ongoing basis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Strategic goals of the organization (what the organization is trying to accomplish) ◆ Trends in the industry ◆ Needs of customers ◆ What the competition is doing <p><u>And for each job incumbent:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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