

Diagnosing human resource ills—and coming up with effective preventive measures and remedies—leads to a better project prognosis.

# only human

by Simon Kent

THERE IS NO QUESTION that great projects have been completed despite or even because of turmoil among team members. However, success is far more likely on a smooth-running project than one plagued by human resources issues. It's up to management to resolve—or avoid—those challenges through communication, conflict management, evaluations and internal recruitment.

“The most important lesson that I have learned is that it is human beings who are doing project tasks,” says Yuji Kishira, director, Being Corp., a construction software developer in Mei, Japan. “If you want to change human behavior in project management, it is management that must be changed.”

illustration by Otto Steininger



Mr. Kishira tries to create efficient project environments by fostering an open and positive discussion of potential problems before they arise. Applying project and program management guidelines developed by the Engineering Advancement Association of Japan, Mr. Kishira worked with Sunagogumi, a construction company based in Hokkaido. Prior to a project commencing, he asked a number of the company's foremen to give three answers to the question, "What is preventing you from making

profits?" For each problem identified, he then repeatedly challenged the foremen with the question, "Why?" This allowed him to drill down and identify the real root cause of that problem. Armed with that knowledge, the foremen could develop and share solutions they might implement in the course of each project to reach an "ideal situation."

For one test project between April and August 2004, Mr. Kishira helped a young, relatively inexperienced Sunagogumi foreman, Mr. Endo, introduce buffer management. Combining that core strategy of critical chain project management (CCPM) with the project and program management framework used standard on Japanese projects helped resolve human resources issues, Mr. Kishira says. "Even when they faced unexpected problems, all the project team members helped to work out the solution with teamwork," he says.

Project leaders were made aware when project elements were

likely to fall behind schedule. Team members then worked with each other to avoid project delay. "Project leaders helped each other across the projects through resource management because each project buffer signal was made very clear," Mr. Kishira says.

"Deploying the project and program management framework along with CCPM significantly accelerated communication throughout the organization," he says. "This provided a very good project operation environment for Mr. Endo where there was trust in the common goal everywhere across the company. That level of 'trust' accelerated his motivation."

The end result was not just increased profits for the project, but also a significant improvement in the performance of the foreman. Mr. Endo surpassed the expectations of his superiors and earned a reputation as one of Sunagogumi's most dependable employees.

### When Things Get Ugly

Clashes are common on projects, and the project manager must communicate with team members to understand and resolve the issues.

"There are three particularly important skills involved in conflict resolution," says Adrian Bailey, Ph.D., CEO of London U.K.-based PeopleFanClub, which specializes in change management and creating motivation and belief. "One is getting people to discuss views honestly and openly with each other in a safe environment, the second is translation and the third is involvement."

People frequently use different language to discuss identical issues, Dr. Bailey says. Conflict can arise, therefore, not because there is an actual disagreement but because people do not always communicate their opinions and concerns in a way other people understand. Explain the project in terms that your audience understands, what you're hoping to achieve and why—and they even may end up as one of the project's greatest champions.



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—Yuji Kishira, Director, Being Corp., Mei, Japan

## Generation Y Joins the Team

Move over, baby boomers and Gen Xers. Generation Y is looking to make its mark in project management ranks. But it turns out this latest batch of employees isn't all that different from the ones that came before it.

"The fact is, the older generations always regard the younger generation as feckless," says James Bywater, a psychologist with SHL, a global supplier of workplace assessment tools in London, U.K. "This view isn't based on any kind of reality—it's simply a view formed by age."

Mr. Bywater identifies the following trends to be true of every younger generation:

more persuasive	They're able to argue and convince others of a particular viewpoint
more outgoing	They're more talkative and noisy
more affiliative	They prefer to work in groups and teams
more innovative	They're ready with lots of ideas
more achieving	They set higher goals for themselves
less modest	They're ready to talk up their own achievements
less conventional	They want to do things differently.

Project managers should capitalize on these traits. They also must not allow their perception of the "feckless youth" stand in the way of the younger generation realizing its full potential.

"I do not worry about Generation Y," says Being Corp.'s Yuji Kishira. "I worry more about management. I believe experienced project managers should take a deeper look at why they have been successful in many projects. I believe it is because they really focused on managing people rather than managing projects."

Dr. Somasundaram Muralidharan of Covansys Corp. says he hasn't seen any "major differences" in this generation. However, "they have become a bit impatient to move ahead in their careers quickly and sometimes need mentoring by a senior colleague to get accustomed to an organization's culture.

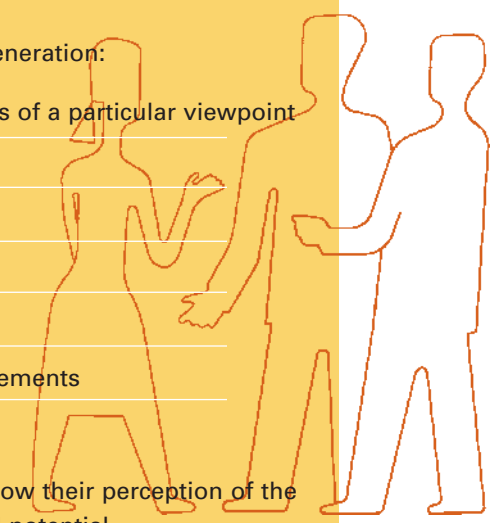
"More often than not, curriculum does not teach them the 'right skills,'" he says. "We spend close to 80 hours on training for each new entrant. We look for not 'what they know' but for 'what they are.' Communication, right attitude and flexibility are the primary criteria for selection."

### Keep It Positive

When conflict does occur, the immediate reaction of many managers is to wade in and knock heads together, but that method is likely to create more negativity. One alternative is appreciative inquiry, a technique developed by David L. Cooperrider, professor and chair of the Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA. Rather

than trying to solve a problem by voicing negative opinions and trying to pin the blame on someone else, team members identify and discuss what works well and what is good about a project or team.

"The level of energy and positivism that is produced by these [appreciative inquiry] sessions is remarkable," says Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin, editor-in-chief at the Center for Business Practice, Haver-town, Pa., USA. She is also co-author of *Optimizing*



*Human Capital With a Strategic Project Office* [Auerbach, 2005]. “Some people are resistant to it because it sounds too touchy-feely but the results are amazing.”



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—Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin

Reducing the potential for conflict and other human resources ills starts at recruitment. Identify the competencies required for a position based on factual evidence, not opinions. “You need to know what needs to be done and you need to hire the right people to do it,” she says. Otherwise, you may be setting them up to fail or laying the groundwork for team conflict.

Try recruiting from within—where you can see candidates in action. This method also ensures new recruits are a good match for the existing culture, an aspect that can be difficult to detect through external recruitment processes. Existing employees may be able to suggest

potential recruits, too. “If you ask people who they want to work with, they will name people who will be able to do the job and who will have the respect and commitment of the rest of the team,” Ms. Cabanis-Brewin says.

### The Ultimate Empowerment

Once recruited, employees can be motivated to perform successfully through effective performance appraisal. “Studies indicate that project team members want measures on their actual performance for that project,” Ms. Cabanis-Brewin says. “Whenever you hear horror stories about appraisal or people saying they hate the process, it's not because they don't want to examine their performance. It's because the appraisal is done in a way that does not relate to what they are doing.” This is particularly true in matrix organizations where human resources processes often are linked not to work on projects, but on departmental objectives, she adds.

At IT services provider Covansys Corp.'s subsidiary in Chennai, India, performance appraisals occur every three months. This schedule ensures each worker has quantitative performance targets that support both the employee's work and the ongoing objectives of the project team.

Known as the personal performance contract (PPC), it has had a

hugely positive influence on employees, says Somasundaram Muralidharan, PMP, Ph.D., senior vice president. He is in charge of process and professional development at the company.

“The PPC is the ultimate in empowerment,” he says. “The employee and his or her manager define the factors to be used to decide employee performance. This ensures acceptance of the process and that performance-related data collection is not perceived as a threat.”

Performance targets set in the PPC can be long- or short-term and may tie in directly with a client's service-level agreement—response times on a maintenance project, for example. Most importantly, the contract clarifies what is expected from each worker, boosting confidence in the appraisal system and significantly reducing conflict within the organization. Previously, about 20 percent of employees would report grievances after every assessment cycle, Dr. Muralidharan says. With PPC, that number has dropped to less than four percent.

Covansys has created a more conducive working atmosphere by ensuring every team member knows what they are meant to be doing and that they will be rewarded for effective performance.

Companies may adopt different techniques, but the goal of a smooth-running project team is one worth pursuing. **PM**

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