

The Impact of Fear on Project Success

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Have you ever thought "...this will never work, but if I tell management they'll fire me"? Have you suppressed information, such as a growing estimate at completion, to prevent unwanted attention, criticism, or help? Would you pad an estimate to ensure your ability to meet promised numbers even when things do not go as planned? These may be legitimate responses to the reality of life in your organization, but they are destructive to the people, the project, and the organization. These "fear" responses substitute self-protection for the honest communication that brings long term success.

Project managers and their teams are charged with finding solutions to difficult problems. This responsibility, however, requires an environment of trust and communication. Without open identification and discussion of problems and risks, the full team of stakeholders – customer, management, project team – cannot participate in selecting the best solution. Too often someone is surprised at the outcome.

Changing the performance focus from "avoiding failure" to "achieving success" requires greater attention to behaviors and less to results. Results are the product of correct behaviors.

Fear and Individuals

Most individuals, in their quest for survival, identify danger and try to avoid it. They learn to "fear" circumstances that they believe will cause them harm. This avoidance occurs whether the feared outcome is real or not. The perfect example of the application of fear is the TV show "Fear Factor." The producers of the show identify things that normally cause fear, such as the fear of falling, then create circumstances intended to cause this fear even though no real danger exists. Individuals apply rational judgments and overcome their fears through evaluating the real risk.

Phobias occur when a fear becomes irrational. With a phobia, the fear manages the individual even though the feared outcome is rationally unlikely. Most of us suffer some phobias. Mine is claustrophobia, so I stay out of tight places. What would be the potential impact to projects be if the phobia was:

- Criticism- Enissophobia
- Making decisions - Decidophobia.
- Neglecting duty or responsibility - Paralipophobia.
- Failure - Atychiphobia or Kakorrhaphiophobia
- Imperfection - Atelophobia
- Punishment - Poinophobia.
- Being ridiculed - Catagelophobia or Katagelophobia.

Fear and Management

Like the TV producers, many managers recognize the power of fear. Rather than using it for entertainment, however, they use it as a tool to force action. These managers set tough goals (such as cost or schedule) and pressure (threaten?) people to meet them. If managers successfully create phobias they can force people to comply. Unfortunately, this fear-based management works. Projects appear “successful” because people “buckle down” in response to the pressure. The projects proceed without reported problems and continue to forecast project success even when failure becomes a certainty. The problem occurs because once this management technique enters the organizational culture it normally passes down through each management level until it reaches the workers and becomes the way of doing business.

Survival in fear-based organizations creates phobias. Individuals seek self protection even when management assures them they have nothing to fear. Self protective behaviors include:

- Hidden reserves – Individuals pad their estimates to ensure they do not fail for reasons beyond their control or to insulate against reduced budgets.
- Manipulated performance – When variance from baseline causes penalties, then data manipulation becomes an approach to self protection.
- Hidden problems – Shooting the messenger creates a lack of messengers, not a reduction in problems.
- Risk suppression – If the risk identifier becomes the owner or branded as “negative” then risks remain unidentified.
- “Student syndrome” – When reserves exist individuals cannot under run or their hidden reserves are known and they will get less next time.

An “objective based” or “results oriented” management became the trend because it relies on outcome goals. These outcome goals are easy to define (complete on cost and on schedule) and measure. Once individuals recognize this and begin self protection, management must continually review all inputs for accuracy and carefully monitor performance against the goals. The net result is that the true cost, schedule, and status of a project are never known either during the estimates or during execution. Decisions are based on incorrect information and the best decisions can not be made.

The fear based approach requires little management skill. Managers increase the pressure and determine who to blame rather than becoming leaders in finding solutions. The individuals, meanwhile, focus on avoiding blame and creating good performance reviews. The outcome is continuous sub-optimization of the projects, high stress, and unnecessary project failure.

A Wisdom Alternative

It would be easy to say “it is a management problem”. That is neither fair nor accurate since management has a responsibility to bring appropriate pressure for performance. The problem really exists in processes that create conflict rather than solutions and in holding people responsible for what they do not control. By changing the underlying

processes both management and the individuals can achieve their objectives. This alternative approach involves two basic changes:

- Make outcome responsibility belong to all
- Focus on behaviors rather than on outcomes

While these two elements are not everything necessary to create a successful organization, they provide key ingredients to a culture that creates success.

Responsibility Assignment

Every stakeholder contributes to the achievement of project outcomes. A customer who sets unreasonable objectives, a salesperson who accepts them, a manager who fails to recognize problems, and a worker who does not provide their best effort become equal participants in failure. Rather than holding the performer ultimately responsible for the failings of all, each stakeholder must accept and correct their share of the cause. If a requested performance cannot be achieved in the existing environment for the desired cost then something must change: the schedule, the cost, or the environment. The hard part of this is admitting failure will occur without a change. This admission of a problem initiates the prevention, or recovery.

The truth provides the foundation for all decisions. If “the project cannot succeed unless...” the team must identify and resolve the problem. The individual or organization best able to implement the required changes must make them or the project will fail. Simply holding the last person in line responsible for the outcome does not work.

- If the customer objective is unattainable – tell the customer
- If marketing makes undeliverable promises – hold them responsible, not the performers
- If development requires special tools or people – assign them or do not expect the desired results

Solving the difficult problems requires an honest discussion of the problems and alternatives available to the project in the context of what can be accomplished under given circumstances. By focusing on the inhibitors – the things that will prevent success – and getting the right person to remove them then success becomes possible.

Behavior Management

The second element of the change makes most technical managers very uncomfortable. Rather than using easily available and finite metrics such as “cost performance index” to evaluate individuals it requires identifying and measuring the desired behaviors. This soft skill lies outside the comfort zone of most technical managers. It also requires accepting up front that even with the right behaviors the objectives may be unattainable. Managers fear they lose the ability to hold people accountable for the outcomes. This is true; they do. That is the good news.

Behavior, or process management, is a common practice for managing the quality of products, whether hardware or software. This is also true with people. Creating the right behaviors produces the best possible results. If an individual does their best then the

regardless of the pressure applied they cannot do more. By removing the fear of failure individuals will accept greater challenges and managers will get better information. The real question is: “If my best person does their best and it isn’t good enough, then what more can be expected of them regardless of the results?” That individual cannot improve their results without a change in skills or environment, neither of which is usually within their control. The objective is to identify this problem before starting rather than as finishing. Ultimately, behavior management requires trust in both directions.

Summary

You may be in a fear-based environment if one or more of the following are true:

- Assignment of blame begins the problem resolution process
- Bullying or making threats is part of task assignment
- “Real” numbers require significant scrubbing or cutting
- Unpleasant surprises typically accompany final project activities
- Problems always show up first as history
- Excuses are not authorized
- Personal objectives tie to project results the individual does not control
- Avoiding blame for failure equals success

If you were measured on your behavior rather than your results would you give your best effort? If the answer is yes, then can you trust your team to do the same? If the answer is no, then you need to change your behaviors and become a leader.

Wouldn’t it be more fun, and more successful, to know that your people are doing their best and always telling the truth? Changing the performance focus from “avoiding failure” to “achieving success” requires defining and measuring the behaviors rather than just the outcomes.