

Accounting for Misaligned Political Agendas

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Most experienced project managers are versed in how to technically initiate, plan, control, execute and close a program/project. However, having these skills can result in being very process driven, which in turn means that project managers can miss the “culture” issues associated with mission-critical, cross-functional initiatives. These issues, organizational nuances and misaligned political agendas represent significant project risk that is not easily identifiable through standard risk assessments.

What is a misaligned political agenda?

No one likes to use the term ‘political,’ but let’s face it, that’s the term everyone uses when dealing with a cross-functional program/project that involves many stakeholders from all areas of the organization.

Anyone associated with project management understands that there are many tools and methodologies available that can help to ensure that an initiative is delivered on time and within budget. Unfortunately, those tools alone will not ensure that all stakeholder needs, expectations and support are aligned. This is something that project managers must learn to recognize and mitigate so that their project can be successful. Perhaps one of the best ways to illustrate a misaligned political agenda is to share an example.

In this situation, the initiative had already experienced two starts, was unsuccessful to date and was about to start a third time. The project was critical to the client as the current environment was causing significant customer issues which resulted in significant backroom operational issues, including additional costs as well as customer frustration.

A new project manager was assigned. She had delivered a similar solution in the past, so this project was not to be overly taxing or challenging as an initiative sometimes can. However, the project manager had no experience with the client organization and culture. The project was cross-functional in nature as it was dependent on the support and engagement of approximately twelve unique areas of operation. The issue was that not all of those stakeholders shared the perspective of the importance of this project.

So what happened during project execution? First, the executive sponsor driving the project was not adept at garnering up-front support of the cross-functional partners/participants. Second, the project manager did not consider all of the stakeholder agendas. The stakeholders were not fully engaged or supportive, which resulted in several additional stops and starts and unnecessary delays. Though the project plan was being managed and the communications prompt and clear, the project was not progressing at the pace dictated by the plan.

Why? There were several different political agendas being executed. If the project sponsor does not (or will not) align them, it is the project manager who must align and engage those that are negatively impacting the project progress in a diplomatic (non-political, unbiased and impartial) manner. In this specific scenario, the project manager had to revisit, realign, engage and coach all of the cross-functional managers.

When the project sponsor and all of the stakeholders became engaged and supportive, the project picked up momentum and the underlying tension was eliminated. Until that point the unseen political risk was jeopardizing project progress and success. The project manager in this example learned that to be successful one must serve as the diplomat that pulls everyone with varying agendas to the table for open discussion.

Steps you can take

In all projects, the best way to prevent misaligned agendas is at the inception of the initiative. At that time, there are several areas where the project manager can take steps to potentially prevent issues down the line.

One of the first steps that you should take is to identify and include every stakeholder as a part of an oversight committee, sometimes referred to as a governance committee, which serves to bring everyone together. This infers that every cross-functional area has been identified from an impact/ownership perspective and included because exclusion can have detrimental effects on the project.

The next step is to talk with the stakeholders to find out what is critical for success to them as well as their commitment to the effort. Are they committed to the project or there in name only? Be sure to integrate all stakeholders' perspectives for tracking purposes and continual review. You may need to meet with each key stakeholder independently to ensure candor during the conversation. After speaking with stakeholders, you should create a communications plan that will help establish standard meeting routines and ensure clear and frequent stakeholder communication. This will manage expectations and minimize surprises as well as garner continued dialog among stakeholders. All of these steps will lead to a commitment of project resources from each stakeholder that is responsible for representing their interests. Keep in mind that a lack of human capital commitment will prevent the project from progressing as planned.

As with every project, there are issues of "time constraints" of cross-functional participants due to other commitments. To prevent any surprises in an oversight committee meeting, be factual about reporting them one-on-one to the stakeholder responsible for the cross-functional area and the associated impacts on the project. Time constraints are real and you should look for any options that may support resolution of the issue. No one wants to be reminded that they provided the "wrong" human resource.

During project kickoff you should ensure that all representatives from the cross-functional areas are included in risk identification, areas of impact, the work breakdown structure for project plan development, identification of what's critical to quality, their respective roles/responsibilities and all expectations ("the rules" of engagement). Keep in mind, exclusion promotes non-ownership.

Remember, the project sponsor should be the person responsible for aligning political agendas and garnering support. Whether this is actually the case or not, you must ensure that the project sponsor is apprised of all issues, political situations, support/non-support of participants of dependent/impacted cross-functional areas and overall project progress (budget, milestones, deliverables, change controls) on a regular basis and prior to any stakeholder meetings. Your job as a project manager is to ensure that the sponsoring executive is successful along with the project.

Most project teams comprise a myriad of team members that represent a matrix managed group. In order for the project to run smoothly and for the group to be successful, each of your team members should have a method of communicating with their management. By assisting in this process you have the opportunity to influence how the communication is delivered. It's also another method of core team and cross-functional team member support as well as ensuring the appropriate communication of facts vs. assumptions.

Your project team's lack of experience can be detrimental to a project. You should address situations where the cross-functional and/or core team members may need additional training and support by communicating these needs to the sponsor and appropriate stakeholder. It's usually best to offer options rather than removing the person from the project.

Though most project managers may possess the technical skills of initiating, planning, executing, controlling and closing a project the “soft skills” are just as important. Projects are about people, people working together to achieve a shared goal – note, *shared goal* is most important. The project manager is a key element in ensuring there is a shared goal among stakeholders, core and cross-functional team members. Everyone’s perspectives, experiences, skills, priorities and “end game” are important and to be respected. Your challenge is aligning them to the goals of the project. As a project manager, possessing the following soft skills will potentially prevent misaligned political agendas:

- Remain an unbiased execution lead. As a project manager, remaining unbiased minimizes any promotion of political agendas on your part.
- Clearly represent facts and communicate them to the stakeholders and solicit feedback. Attempt to deal only with facts and not assumptions. Issues don’t belong to one area; they are shared among the stakeholders.
- Recognize that every cross-functional area impacted by the project represents additional project risk, from a political, resource and change perspective.

Summary

Though projects support an organization’s goals, objectives and targets, they are also a forum for political havoc. Everyone has unique goals, perspectives and opportunities as is evident within every project team as well as at the executive and sponsorship levels.

The misalignment of political agendas can sabotage a project when there is no “apparent” reason for its lack luster success or failure. Early recognition of the politics surrounding a project initiative and taking action can help garner support from all areas, including the team and project sponsor.

As in any team sport – the team wins, the coach loses. Don’t be the losing coach!

Karen McIsaac, PMP, is an expert in organizing, planning and executing large program/project initiatives. She has over 20 years of experience in delivering large business-driven initiatives with significant business, cultural and technological impact. Karen has assisted the firm’s clients create success stories through achievement of project-related business objectives and management of the associated change.

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