Managing Expectations to Manage Relationships

At some point in our careers as project managers we will encounter people who are difficult to work with. Sometimes, these people work well with others. Other times, they don’t seem to work well with anyone. In either case, we can only control our behavior, which through an unfair application of mathematics, makes us 100% responsible for management of the relationship.

When I reflect on the few—yet significant—working relationship problems I’ve observed over the years, I’ve found they trace to shortcomings in expectations concerning competence or values:

- **Competence Expectations.** We believe that the person lacks either a management or technical skill set that we view is essential for the work. Working with the person frustrates us because we feel we are spending too much time managing performance shortcomings. We are concerned that we will have to take on additional work or involve another team member to overcome the weakness. But in any case, we are concerned that our work with the person will compromise the budget, the schedule, or team morale.

- **Values Expectations.** The person may be technically and managerially competent, but there is something about his or her approach that either annoys us or we find distrustful. The person exploits the gray areas, taking advantage of others or creating situations that produce personal benefits at the expense of others. If there were a clear violation of a rule, policy, or law, the situation would be easy to address. Instead, we’re drawn into situations where rules are open to interpretation. Most people seem to understand the unwritten rules, but this person doesn’t. We are concerned that this person’s behavior will compromise team morale, alienate others, undermine trust and confidence, or worse, lead to legal problems.

**Personal Attention**

It would be great to “depersonalize” the situation and work through the issues in a distant and objective manner as popular psychology suggests. But expectations regarding competence and values are personal matters that demand our personal attention.

In a recent article posted on the Harvard Business Review Blog Network, Peter Bergman explains that we should examine the reasons we don’t like someone. While we may not always dislike the people we have difficulties in working with, his advice is still relevant. Bergman suggests that we look inside ourselves to see if there is something in our own character or behavior that we find disappointing that is reflected in the character or behavior of the person we dislike. I suggest that we dig deeper: Is there something in that person’s character or behavior that brings out a personal characteristic or behavior in us that may not be present in the other person, but that we find troubling or disappointing?
It can be tedious and challenging work to explore these issues from the perspective of 100% responsibility, but I believe it pays off by leading to one of three outcomes:

1. **Our expectations of others reveal our personal flaws.** While we should set high expectations for others, we should make sure that expectations are clear and supported by project and organizational management systems and not driven by personal biases. We’ll end up being better project managers and will be better positioned to shape our organizations for success.

2. **Our expectations of others provide opportunities for all to grow.** If our expectations are valid and supported by project and organizational management systems, we can help others become more competent and make better value judgments. In the end, everyone benefits.

3. **Our expectations of others eliminate obstacles to success.** Valid expectations, and our dedication to them, reveal the actions and motivations of those who exploit system uncertainties for personal gain. These individuals, unless they are prepared to change and grow, will move on to other organizations or projects where incompetence or questionable behavior are tolerated.

**Project Management: Human Resources and Communications**

Fortunately, the project management discipline provides an excellent system for working through these issues. The Project Management Institute’s *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* establishes nine knowledge areas. Two of these, human resources and communications, provide specific processes that support a systematic and reasoned approach to heading off or resolving problems with difficult people.

**Human Resources**

Project managers are responsible for acquiring the team, developing it, and managing it. Sometimes, we forget the development responsibility, expecting team members to be fully competent, often in multiple areas. If we’ve taken the time to properly scope the project and determine resource needs, we’ll understand the skill set the project needs. As we staff the project, we can evaluate the competencies of staff against the required skill set and take steps to overcome deficiencies through an appropriate development plan. For example, our project may require a technical expert with command of the subject and the ability to communicate effectively at a public hearing. Our team member may have the technical skills, but lack the presentation skills required for the role. In this case, we shore up our expert’s presentation skills by building time into the schedule for rehearsal and presentation skills coaching. This approach recognizes competency issues at the outset, allows us to address them in advance before they become problems, and supports the development of the individual and the organization.

**Communications**

Project managers are responsible for identifying and understanding stakeholders, managing stakeholder expectations, sharing information, and reporting information. These responsibilities, while typically focused on the technical aspects of the project, also encompass the softer issues like ethics and values. Regular and formal communications with stakeholders in the form of project instructions and progress reports can eliminate problems that arise from both competence and value expectations (see “PM File: Simple Communication Tools Drive Project Success,” *EM*, April 2007, pp. 30–31). Project instructions can be used to clarify expectations and prevent people from exploiting system uncertainties for personal benefit. Similarly, progress reports provide a framework for promptly documenting and addressing deviations from expectations. While these tools can be used retrospectively for defensive purposes, their primary value is informing the team and keeping expectations at the forefront so they don’t have to be used for defensive purposes.

Relying on basic project management principles allows us to manage relationships by managing expectations. By taking 100% responsibility for managing the relationship, we’ll head off problems, build better relationships, improve competency, and advance integrity.

**References**
