

Team members, stakeholders  
or sponsors behaving badly?

**HERE'S HOW TO SQUASH NEGATIVITY  
BEFORE IT GETS OUT OF CONTROL.**

**Negating**

**NEGAT**

BY DAVID WHITEMYER



A HEALTHY DOSE OF PESSIMISM isn't always a bad thing to have in the workplace. In a *Psychology Today* article published last November, author Annie Murphy Paul noted, “[P]essimism about a potential outcome can mobilize us to act with alacrity: There’s nothing like a looming disaster to make us get things done.”

But on projects, a distinct line must be drawn between that healthy pessimism and outright negativity. “Negativity always results in more negativity,” says Sam Barnes, project manager of web development projects at online dating and social network company Global Personals, Windsor, England. “It’s contagious and poisonous.”

Outward negativity can create speed bumps toward successful project completion and, at worst, cause project failure or irreparable damage to a client relationship. That’s a risk no project manager can afford to take. Effectively turning around a bad attitude requires recognizing that each role—team member, stakeholder or sponsor—requires a different approach.

#### TEAM MEMBERS: CURING BAD APPLES

When a team member questions if the project is beneficial or even possible, the reaction commonly stems from pessimism about the deadline, budget or both. Charles Nelson, architect at Building Technology Pty Ltd., an architecture firm in Melbourne, Australia, identifies four types of team members whose actions foster negative morale:

**1 Entitled:** If a team member has a superiority complex, reinforce the fact that the team will succeed or fail as a group. Most superiority complexes mask inferiority complexes; if team members feel accepted, they don’t have to “prove themselves” as much.

**2 Chip on the shoulder:** Find out why they feel angry, and get it out in the open. Challenge them to keep their frustrations out of the office. If they’ve been given a chance to embrace a positive attitude but won’t—or can’t—then it’s time for them to move on.

**3 Incompetent:** If someone simply isn’t capable of doing the job, he or she may need to be reassigned to a less demanding role.

**4 Just plain lazy:** Reinforce project goals and milestones. Find out if the person is just bored and

needs a challenge. If they really don’t want to work, show them the door.

Mr. Barnes suggests project leaders start with a one-on-one meeting with each negative team member to discuss his or her behavior. During the meeting, set goals, document actions taken and schedule a follow-up conversation. “Sometimes people feel better and more positive after getting their feelings off their chest,” he says.

If the attitude persists, the negative team member could work alone and still be productive, depending on the nature of the project. Keep in mind, though, the only feasible course of action might be termination.

#### STAKEHOLDERS: OVERCOME THEM

Negative stakeholders can prove most challenging for a project manager simply because their numbers can be large and they’re sometimes difficult to identify, says Yegor Bugayenko, PMP, Amsterdam, Netherlands-based CTO of software company TechnoPark Corporation.

In addition, stakeholder negativity can stem from any number of sources, including improper understanding of the project, natural feelings of competition or fear of job loss. The fact that these fears are sometimes justified makes dealing with the affected parties even tougher.

Project managers can turn off-putting stakeholders into project allies by trying to see the project from their perspective. Mr. Bugayenko describes a recent project in which his company developed an enterprise resource planning system that eventually made a particular employee redundant: “He was our primary negative stakeholder, so our first job” was to address his situation.

Mr. Bugayenko proactively approached both the employee and his manager, disclosing that job loss was inevitable. As part of the project, the organization helped the employee find a new position. “He was incredibly appreciative and ended up helping us through the process,” he says.

If an internal stakeholder continues to create



“Most conflicts occur because someone is unsure about something.”

—Yegor Bugayenko, PMP, TechnoPark Corporation, Amsterdam, Netherlands



obstacles, project managers can escalate the issue to whomever has formal authority over that individuals. If the stakeholder issue is coming from outside the organization, escalation may not be possible. In those cases, project leaders can minimize the overall negative impact by limiting the stakeholder's contact with the project team.

### **SPONSORS: FROM THE TOP DOWN**

Handling a negative executive sponsor is perhaps the most sensitive of all the situations. After all, they have the power to kill a project outright. Because sponsors may not agree with or understand the day-to-day decisions on a project, project managers should try to define early on the sponsor's responsibilities. Delineating these roles helps decrease the disruptive potential of a pessimistic sponsor later by separating them from everyday operations.

Even a negative sponsor usually still is the most important source for project funding and support. "Stay cool," advises Mr. Nelson. "Don't let them get to you. Don't take it personally." When confronting the sponsor is necessary, it should be done tactfully and in private.

Negative clients must be handled with similar tact. They may have an issue relinquishing authority to an outsider or treat the project team like galley slaves, Mr. Nelson says.

But they *are* the clients, after all. "Do everything you are obliged to do under the contract and politely decline anything else they ask you to do," Mr. Nelson says.

If all else fails and the project manager needs to escalate the issue of a negative sponsor or client to the executive level for resolution, it could diminish his or her authority in the organization.

Still, if project managers have good intentions, they shouldn't be hesitant to approach negative sponsors or clients. "Whenever I have challenged sponsors or clients when it's very obvious that my reason for doing so is to protect the project in some way, I've never received anything but understanding, appreciation, respect and, most importantly, posi-

## **ARE YOU TOO NEGATIVE?**

As difficult as it is to admit, sometimes the problem lies within.

Negative behavior in team members is sometimes caused by "insensitivity, arrogance or tunnel vision" of the project manager in charge, says Charles Nelson, Building Technology Pty Ltd., Melbourne, Australia. Project managers should look in the mirror to make sure they're steering clear of these common negative traits:

**CYNICAL:** Project managers who are critical of everything and everyone create an atmosphere of distrust.

**RIGID:** Good project managers are flexible when it comes to situations and people's circumstances.

**DEFIANT:** Project managers should show respect to their supervisors as well as their team members.

**ARROGANT:** No one likes a know-it-all. Self-deprecation is a clever strategy to show empathy and that you're "one of the team."

**APATHETIC:** If project managers don't care about the project, then team members won't either.



itive results that help my project get back on track," Mr. Barnes says. "I believe as a project manager, you must have the strength to do things like this when they're called for."

### **PLAN FOR POSITIVITY**

Negative team members, sponsors, stakeholders and even clients should be looked at as a normal part of any project setting—and actively and strategically managed as such.

Mitigating this risk requires communicating project details up front, listening to each group's concerns and finding ways to address them. "Most conflicts occur because someone is unsure about something," Mr. Bugayenko says. No matter the group, if people know what's going on and what to expect, they're less likely to wreak havoc on the project with a bad attitude. **PM**