

Project Team Member Attitudes: Galley Slaves, Pirates or The Love Boat



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Summary: Each project team takes on its own character and develops its own culture. But there are several kinds of project team cultures we see with great frequency and they usually result from the project manager's actions.

It's easy to talk about your project team's attitudes. Of course, they're highly motivated, always do their best work and derive enormous personal satisfaction from working on your projects. It's also easy to kid ourselves about the attitudes and culture of your project team and talk about the team process.

But talk does not build a team culture we can rely on when problems arise. Your PM style and actions do much to determine the attitudes of the team. Let's take a look at what's really happening down below decks and see how potentially productive teams run aground in different ways.

Micromanaged Galley Slaves

A monstrously detailed project plan, with a pinch of distrust and a bit too much desire to demonstrate technical knowledge, lead all too easily to micromanagement. Everyone vehemently denies micromanaging. But it is the predominant project management style and its very easy to slide into, particularly when things go badly. All of us fall prey to it because we're task-oriented. That's why they made us project managers in the first place. Let's look at the micromanaged project team.

Down in the bilge, the sweaty galley slaves are shackled to their benches by the PM's all-inclusive instructions. The PM's mantra is; "Don't think! Just follow my instructions and come to me for all decisions." Micromanagers love long lines of team members outside their cubicles; it confirms their technical genius. As a result, the team takes no responsibility for the project's results or their assignments; they feel accountable for nothing but doing what the PM tells them and avoiding criticism when the technical guru checks every nit and tick of their work and always find flaws.

In turn, the micromanaging PM complains loudly about having to make all the decisions and all the tough judgments because the team "can't think outside the box" and "shows no initiative."

Micromanagement works wonderfully when the PM is a genius and everyone else on the team is a boob. Unfortunately, we can make micromanagement work only on very small projects where the team members' work is rote in nature and the PM is an expert in every element of the project. These tiny successes fool project managers into thinking that micromanagement works on larger efforts too. But when the project requires team members to use their judgment and

actually think instead of just row, we have project failure. Usually micromanaging geniuses reach their level of incompetence early in their project management careers. Their techniques don't let them reap the best their people can offer. They get little more than grudging obedience that will make it very difficult to recover from the inevitable problems that occur. Micromanagement gives us an excessive amount of attention to the details of what we will do and very little focus on the business result we need to achieve.

Love Boat Crew

Then there's the Love Boat approach which occurs when we get carried away with relationships and processes. The nurturing project manager thinks the team is really focused on their interactions and relationships. The Love Boat captain asks everyone to sign a project charter filled with psalms about how we will respect one another's opinions, be supportive and share each other's pain. Status meetings require a lot of caring. All assignments are done by teams who are jointly accountable. The very predictable result is that one person does all the work while the others nurture.

But the fact is that most of these people are on three other project teams, have a real job that's falling apart and haven't seen less than a 60-hour work-week in years. They want clear direction and a chance to share success with their peers, not just interpersonal process. So all this joining of hands and caring gets old quickly, especially when the PM is too busy nurturing people to keep the project on track.

The Third Way-Accountability for Measured Results

There are other project teams that avoid the problems we discussed above. These teams can change course as directed and deliver results with ease. The team members actually seem to operate with creativity and individual initiative. And most stunning of all, they derive satisfaction from their individual achievements as well as the collective success.

The PMs on these achievement-driven projects build their team on an interconnected set of measured business outcomes by decomposing the project scope into measured deliverables. Each team member has an assignment that defines success in objective terms so the team member knows what a good job is before they start work. The PMs check their team's work but the people have bigger assignments and the PM checks their end results, not every step they take in getting there. This give the project managers time to look far ahead and avoid problems well in advance. The team members are focused on results and they take much of the corrective action. In fact, some of the inevitable overruns are compensated for by other assignments that finish early. Funny how we never see early completions on the slave galley or Love Boat. Maybe it has something to do with what happens to people who finish early.

While the achievement-driven crew can cope with adversity, that's not true elsewhere. When problems arise the team cultures on the Love Boat and slave galley change in ugly ways.

Erosion of Confidence

Project teams built around the project manager's expertise or the team's personal relationships with the PM have trouble handling adversity. A few missed deadlines or an unacceptable deliverable erodes their confidence in the PM. The erosion occurs when the team realizes that the PM cannot lead them to project success. They lose confidence in the PM's techniques

(whether nurturing or micromanaging) and realize that they will suffer the consequences of project failure. Neither the 8,975 task Gantt chart of the micromanager nor the mission statement mush of the Love Boat give their PMs the ability to control scope and protect the team.

Without a plan based on clear measured results that link each team member's accountability to the project result, the PM can't control scope changes. In troubled times these PMs only keep the project executives smiling by never questioning a project add-on or asking for more time and budget. As night and evening work increases morale declines. The team knows they are doomed to failure. Inability to recover from setbacks leads to the next stage, which is even worse.

Blame Avoidance: Mutinous Pirates

When the planned completion date is a dim memory and unnecessary tasks like testing and user training are dropped as redundant, the project team cultures can morph into blame avoidance. Now people spend more time protecting themselves from the failure that is sure to come than trying to avoid that failure. Are these team members paranoid? Yes. Do they have reason to be paranoid? Yes, they know punishment is coming. Suddenly those dates they discussed casually, "Just so we'll have something to put into the plan," become rock-solid commitments against which their first-born child is pledged.

They do have reason to worry. Their PM and team mates are already practicing lightning fast finger-pointing, at them. When the truth reaches the executive level it will all come cascading down. Avoiding blame becomes more important than working on the project. A good excuse is worth its weight in gold and anyone who "Stands up to his or her responsibilities" is shot.

What is especially disastrous about these cultures change is that they make recovery even more difficult.

What About the Achievement-driven Team?

Remember those other project ships, the achievement-driven vessels that changed direction with agility and had crews that operated with a lot of independence and initiative because they were accountable for measured end-results? They don't have a rebellion when things go badly. And even if failure looms, the crew doesn't worry about being blamed for things outside their control. Unlike the Love Boat or slave galley, these PMs specified in advance and in objectively measured terms, what each team member was accountable for delivering. Even if the project as a whole falls short the individual team members can have a success on their deliverables.

So how do we build this achievement culture? First, we show them the linkages between the measured end results they will be accountable for achieving and the project's business outcome. We trust them by holding them accountable for a significant end result, not each of the steps on the path to it.

Second, we take the risk of telling them exactly what we want by assigning them a measured end result that is unambiguous and objectively measurable. The PM may be wrong but that's the PM's responsibility not the team member's.

Third we match their agreed upon measured business achievement with a fairly negotiated estimate of the work required; not just a date we pluck from the sky. When people participate in crafting their accountability and estimating the work we get better commitment.

Conclusion

We teach the techniques discussed in this article in our [Individual web courses](#) and [in-person seminars](#) for your organization.