

Influencing, Persuading & Selling in Project Management



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Summary: Project managers need "soft skills" & sales techniques to secure project approval and game support from stakeholders and commitment from their team.

Project Fantasy...

The organization's senior executives scurried into the company board room eager to hear the wisdom of their superstar project manager about their latest strategic initiative. An expectant buzz of conversation filled the room as people turned to see if the PM had arrived. They heard a faint swishing noise as the PM walked slowly toward the podium, belt-mounted cell phones, pagers and an iPhone jostling against one another. Head down the PM walked slowly, deep in thought. Executives smiled at each other glancing fondly at the PMs elegantly shabby jeans.

Then the PM looked up at the crowd with a shy smile and said, "Our project scope for the AFR443 project will have a GUI interface and 354 nano-gigabytes of ROM, RAM, TAM and PAM and no bandwidth *impactamente* on customers nor any psycho-trauma for our techno-workers."

The executives shrieked their approval of the project plan.

One executive slammed a hand on the oak table and shouted, "If any of my people fail to cooperate instantly, you can flog them."

Managers who said, "You have my full support," actually meant it. There weren't any new #1 priority projects to interfere with AFR443. Team members treated project assignments as if they really mattered rather than as fill-in work when there was nothing more important to do.

Project Reality...

The project manager stood by the podium facing 30 empty chairs in the conference room. Finally, a summer intern hesitantly entered and said, "Ms. Royster, the controller, told me to come to your project meeting and represent finance, everyone else is busy. She also told me to tell you that you have our full support but that we can only contribute one full time person to the team, not the three analysts you wanted, and that person will be me ...until the end of summer."

Best Practices Include Persuading, Influencing and Selling

You can hope for management support and team member commitment for your projects. But most likely your projects will often fail due to the absence of both. The alternative is to recognize the need to "sell" your projects even to the people who asked you to do them. You also need to influence your team and persuade your stakeholders to support the effort. Your boss or other company executives have to "buy" your project just as a client buys a project from a consultant. Most importantly the selling can't stop when the project is approved or launched;

it continues every week until the final deliverable is accepted. So let's tackle some fundamental questions.

Let's start by deciding what you're selling. Here's a hint; you are not selling all the marvelous technical and engineering features in the project that you love to talk about. Unfortunately, those goodies have little value to executives. So you need to talk about other things that do have value to your sponsor and stakeholders.

Project Positioning & Hidden Performance Pressures

Good project managers, in the consulting world or working internally, sell business value because that is what executives want to buy. But every good idea or technical wiz bang is not perceived to have value by these executives. The executives see business value in achievements that relieve one or more of the performance pressures the executives feel. Good consultants and project managers aim their projects at performance pressures and that is how they sell their projects. They sell what executives want to buy unlike most project managers who try to sell something that few people are interested in buying; no wonder they get so little support and commitment.

What are these executive performance pressures? They are things like the revenue shortfall their boss is so upset about. Or a pressure could come from customer complaints about the product a manager's department produces. Or a director's division may be over budget and the upper level executives are screaming for cost cuts. Performance pressures like these occupy the thoughts of managers and executives which may explain why they have so little interest in the technical and engineering details which fascinate so many project managers.

The problem for project managers is that most of the time performance pressures have to be unearthed. Sponsors of projects tend to tell project managers what to do; they don't describe the performance pressures they feel. Unfortunately, even if the sponsor has not told the project manager about their performance pressures, they will judge the project's success based on whether or not it relieves their performance pressures. So PMs need to unearth the performance pressures of their sponsor and stakeholders.

"Buying Perceptions" Barrier

Why don't many clients/users/bosses share this information? First, sometimes it reflects badly on them so there are many who won't talk about their problems or pressures. Second, mid-level managers who are sponsoring projects may not know what upper-level performance pressures caused their boss to ask for the project. But the dominant reason decision makers don't tell project managers about their performance pressures is that they do not perceive project managers as a source of relief for their performance pressures. There are several levels of sponsor buying perceptions and most project managers occupy the lowest rung in the minds of their project sponsors. That lowest level is project order-taker. With that perception the executive thinks through the pressures he or she faces, determines the solution and gives their order to the project manager (or often has a subordinate do it). In essence sponsors share the same amount of information with the PM as they give the person at the drive-up window at McDonald's®.

Here's an example of a PM trying to probe for performance pressures with a decision maker who has an order-taker buying perception of the PM:

Decision maker says, "Here are the changes I want in the report layouts."

PM says, "Great! Exactly why do we need these changes? What are you trying to achieve?"

Decision maker answers, "I need the changes by next week."

PM says, "If I understand your business purpose then I can do a better job of ..."

Decision maker replies, "That's not your concern. Just make the changes in these report layouts by next week!"

PM says, "You're making me fly blind here. If I don't understand what you..."

Decision maker snaps, "Make the changes in these report layouts," and leaves the meeting.

This PM asked the right questions to unearth the performance pressures that triggered the project request but failed to discover the performance pressure(s) involved.

The brick wall this PM hit was a low level buying perception due to poor positioning with the decision maker. It might result from the sponsor's previous experience with PMs who operated in the order-taker mode and never even asked about the performance pressures.

Building Bad Perceptions with Techno-babble

Changing poor buying perceptions takes time. When PMS do get a chance to meet with a decision maker they need to improve the sponsor's buying perception. Unfortunately many things can get in the way. Out of nervousness or a desire to impress the sponsor with technical expertise, a PM might drag the conversation down into the technical detail and lose the chance to improve the sponsor's perception. PMs should focus on the executive's performance pressures and achievements in their department to relieve it.

To get at a sponsor's performance pressures, stop talking about the "delicious" technical details of the project and probe/listen for their performance pressures. Even better, we go into the meeting having gathered information about their likely performance pressures and seek confirmation. We use these sessions to find out what they want to buy as a project result and that can be quite different from what they want us to do.

Summary

Selling projects is a process of positioning. A PM works to elevate the sponsor's perceptions of project managers. Then use the improved perception to position projects so they relieve the executive's performance pressures. Each time a project relieves a performance pressure, their buying perception improves, making it easier to secure and hold support for this project and easier to sell the next one.

All the techniques in this article are part of our [Achievement-driven project methodology](#) (AdPM™) which we teach in [individual training classes](#) over the Internet as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).