

RECOGNIZING GOOD PROJECT PERFORMANCE



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We have some fun as our superhero(ine) Chris Pimbock deal with a sponsor and project from hell.

Unreaped Consequences

What's a really sneaky cause of project failure? Is it a lack of Gantt charts? Is the 4-letter acronym for the project not zippy enough?

When we look at failed projects and organizations where project failure is common, we usually see the following evil brew:

- ❑ Project sponsors can't objectively measure project success during, or even at the end of, the project.
- ❑ Project managers have neither the authority nor the tools to measure and reward performance, particularly for people from the client's organization or from another "functional silo" in their organization.

The combination convinces project team members that their level of performance really doesn't matter very much. They do after all have "real jobs" not to mention personal lives. And, if project performance really doesn't matter, why not pay attention to those things that do? Oh sure, they have to look interested and committed but that's easy to fake.

Performance, Unless Grotesque, Doesn't Matter

How could these people possibly think project performance doesn't matter? Because no matter how dire the threats or how great the rewards promised during the launch meeting, team members know they will reap neither. What they've learned is that every member of the project team will be invited to the same pizza party when it's all over. That's right, both those people who have achieved great things and those people who have gotten a great deal of rest will each be rewarded with the same size slice of luke-warm pepperoni pizza.

It all starts at the launch meeting where somebody in a suit says, "Now, this is the high-priority project! The President and Chief Executive



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Officer will both be keeping their eyes on this one because it's critical to the corporation's future. It's also important to each of our careers. If we succeed we'll all share in the rewards and if we fail..." Here there's always a dramatic pause. "Well, no sense dwelling on unpleasant things." The problem with this speech is that it lacks a critical component: the truth. The truth is that neither the project manager nor the sponsor can really determine how people performed. Oh sure, if they catch someone with 32 company PC's in their pick-up truck or if somebody figures out a way to cut 6 months and \$5 million from the budget, they can evaluate that. But for less extreme performance which is the norm, the PM and sponsor really can't tell who's done well or badly. The only objective measures of performance they have are the due dates for individual tasks and only the gods know from where those dates came. Anyway, the people on the project usually feel that the due dates were crammed down their throats and they have no more commitment to meeting these dates than do politicians to the truth.

The Mother Of Ineffective Recognition Programs

You may remember when "Employee of the Month" was a frequently used motivational tool. You may also recall that winners of this reward were usually granted a reserved parking place for 30 days or had their name inscribed on a plaque that hung near the restrooms. These rewards usually subjected the winners to so much criticism and scorn from their peers that it caused future winners to use the phrase, "Ah, crap, I'm Employee of the Month."

What caused people to react this way? Well first, no one was sure exactly what the person had done to get the reward. This caused suspicious minds to think the worst. Second, because no one understood what behavior had led to the reward, no one could see that behavior as being meritorious. Third, as these programs continued, people started to win "Employee of the Month" for no better reason than "it was their turn." This last element eroded the value of public recognition entirely. We see project recognition programs that follow exactly the same path. After someone has completed his or her task, the project manager subjectively decides to recognize his or her work publicly. No one, not even the recipient, understands exactly what he or she did to merit the recognition. So, no one perceives that it was earned.

As more and more members of the project team receive this recognition, the value of that recognition falls to zero.

Bad For Poor Performers, Devastating For Good

This situation is devastating for an individual who has done an outstanding job and knows it. Two bad things can happen. First, with no way to identify a genuine success, the PM may not recognize it unless the person speaks up, and few do. The second bad thing that can happen is that the outstanding performance may be recognized with a meaningless, "Employee of the Month" type reward. That's worse than no recognition at all because it undermines even the satisfaction the individual might gain from the achievement itself. We've been talking about discouraging a person who delivered an outstanding achievement (better result, under-budget etc.). What happens with

someone who delivered less than they should have and/or took much longer to do it than planned? In other words, how well does the usual set of motivational tools work to correct a performance problem. Well, the alleged poor performer, when confronted, will give the PM a quizzical look and probably say, "Ohhh, that's what you wanted." The PM tries to explain that the person should have known that from the start. This debate can go on for a while and then the PM points out the missed due date and the person says, "You and the bosses set that date, I never thought it was realistic!" We can go back and forth on this one too. But no one was clear about who was accountable for what, and we have no objective measures to which anyone was committed. Project managers quickly learn that it's better to tolerate poor performance than to try and make the case that someone performed poorly.

So How Do We Do Better?

Unless you have big hunks of money or a Porsche to award outstanding performance, we need to make public recognition work. People need to see the recognition as valuable, as something earned. To avoid the "Employee of the Month" mess, team members' actual results must be measured against legitimate and preexisting standards.

As an example, say a PM calls a team member to the front of the room and says to the whole team, "Pat did a great job developing the new customer history screens for the phone reps. Every one loves them and they were ready a week early! If we all performed at Pat's level this whole project would be a great success." Pat grins sheepishly and notices the snickers at the back of the room, knowing that people are wondering what Pat really did to earn the recognition. No one knows what Pat was supposed to do, or how hard it was or how loose or tight the due date was. The recognition is not based on the perception that Pat earned anything. If Pat also feels that the recognition was unearned and tells people this, we're headed for the Employee of the Month situation. There was no preexisting standard and the basis of the PM's comparison was not legitimate. The goal a PM uses as the basis for recognition must exist before the person started work. If the standard is set after performance, recognition seems "rigged," or phony. Everyone must understand what each team member's target was at the beginning and be able to compare actual results to it. Second, everyone must see the standard as legitimate. We're dealing with professionals so we can't count their output and say, "Pat licked 3000 stamps in 5 days!" Our only option is to develop a measured achievement for each major assignment in the project. Then we make it legitimate by negotiating the number of hours required for the achievement. While this process takes a certain amount of time, it gives us legitimate preexisting standards against which to measure performance. We also may find that the process creates clear performance expectations and more commitment.

Now, a PM is in a position to call Pat to the front of the meeting and say to the project team, "As you all know from the Gantt chart, Pat was assigned the achievement of producing a customer history screen with 6 months of transaction history and a response time of 1.5 seconds with 150 hours of work. Pat produced a screen with 6 months of history and gave us 0.5 second response time and did it in 100 hours. This

really positions us to meet the higher level achievement that Pat and several others are contributing to which is resolving 90% of our customer calls in less than 120 seconds. And, if we hit that achievement we're in great shape to reach the project's measure of success which is, as you know, "60% of our customer's rate our service as better than the competition."

Summary

Conceiving a hierarchy of measured achievements for a project is not easy. It requires a different kind of thinking about the end-results of the project and then each assignment in it. This is the heart of our [Achievement-driven Project Methodology](#). You might want to refer to articles on doing this in the free Project Repository on our website.