

Project Team from Hell



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We have some fun with the worst project team imaginable and see how our superhero(ine) Chris Pimbock turns things around.

Chris Pimbock, the impudent project manager, closed the two polished oak doors and walked away from the IQ-lowering planning session, recalling the executive's phrases:

- ❑ "I'll know what I want when I see it"
- ❑ "The objective is world-class performance"
- ❑ "We need to be flexible and plan this project as we go"
- ❑ "The finish date is an immovable object."

It's so nice to have a project sponsor provide clear strategic vision for the project. No wonder this "Teflon" executive had left a trail of project failures and ruined project management careers. Spotting a convenient trashcan, Chris crumpled the list of 376 requirements dictated over the last 90 minutes and dropped them into the receptacle. The executive had also assembled an absolutely "top rate" project team for the effort, all of whom were now awaiting Chris's arrival so the project could get off to a fast start.

Chris entered the conference room and abruptly stopped, as the path to the conference table was blocked by an enormously wide person who said, "This will not work! I don't know why you people always have to change things. I see it as my job to make sure that no harm is done to our perfectly satisfactory ways of doing things which have worked just fine for the past 18 years." Chris smiled broadly, pondered arranging a traffic or food-poisoning accident for this person and said, "That's exactly the sort of vigilance we need on this project. Keep up the good work."

Chris smiled at the rest of the assembled team, especially at Greg and Marcy; two great performers. The impudent PM pulled out a chair to sit in. Suddenly a warm, damp breath filled Chris' left ear, "I am so enthusiastic about this project I can hardly wait to get started. The opportunity to work with you is a dream come true!

Oh, by the way I'd like to work on a little three-person team with Greg and Marcy."

Chris saw Greg and Marcy roll their eyes and knew instantly that the



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role of team parasite was filled. This parasite would leech onto a hard worker or two, count on them to do all the work and then reappear at task completion time to bask in the glory of their hard work.

Chris said, "Nice of you to offer but I don't want others claiming credit for your work. How about a one-person team?"

From across the long mahogany table, a 1970's love-child with a gray ponytail and beard, three cell phones and two pagers, pressed a button on a pocket PC and a tiny color printer spit out a long list. "Dude, I'll need three new CASE tools and here's the list of the new hardware...some of it won't be released for a month or two. This project's gonna blow people's minds; the technology will be AWESOME!"

Chris took the list, smiled again and said, "Great, I'll save this with our sponsor's requirement list."

"My department is very concerned," whined a rat-faced person at the far end of the table. "The deadlines are impossible and the whole feasibility of these assignments is very dubious."

"What deadlines? What assignments?" Chris asked, mystified.

"The ones you're going to give us."

A strong, regal voice boomed from the back of the room, "I will tolerate neither your grubby assignments nor your deadlines. I will tell you when I'm done. Until that time you will wait with your foolish little Gantt charts and schedules. I am an artiste and my work defies all measurement as well as your understanding."

The respectful hush that descended over the team told Chris that this was the project's technical Guru. Three young faces, tongues out and panting like puppy dogs admired the Guru like front-row ticket holders at a rock concert. They chorused, "This is our first project, we'll be finished early and under-budget for sure."

Chris scanned the project team from hell, feeling less than perfectly positioned for success.

How to cope

Chris has no formal authority over any member of this hootenanny and no rewards to use as incentives. Support from the "Teflon" sponsor is also unlikely. Chris faces several challenges:

- ❑ _How to focus people's attention on the end result
- ❑ _How to motivate those team members whose natural inclination is to do nothing
- ❑ _How to restrain those whose inclination is to do too much
- ❑ _How to focus the efforts of those team members who resist having their performance channeled in specific directions.

The answer to all these questions is that our impudent project manager must craft assignments for each of these individuals that specify an unambiguous and crystal clear business achievement for which each team member is accountable. Then we avoid guessing or subjective judgments about when the team member has succeeded. They also know what is "good enough" without the PM specifying every little micro task that each team member must complete.

One little problem

There's one little problem. The quality of each team member's assignments Chris designs will never be better than the overall project "assignment." No matter how much skill a PM brings to project design and assignments, that skill can never make up for a mushy project scope. Our impudent project manager has absolutely no chance of harnessing even a good project team without a clear definition of the project's overall success. This must be stated in unambiguous and objectively measurable terms. Fortunately our project manager has a bit of impudence and knows the ancient Babylonian project management mantra.

"We can debate what the project should have achieved after the budget and duration are gone or be pushy in the beginning and insist on securing a measurable business purpose before we begin."

So the impudent project manager goes back to the "Teflon executive," adopting an "I can't begin this shopping trip until I know what you want to buy" attitude. If the executive slithers under each commitment we propose, we paste an angelic and slightly confused expression on our faces. Remember, a good subordinate doesn't waste company resources by starting a job before understanding what's expected. Depending on your style, some key phrases to use are:

- ❑ Intellectual: "A rich harvest reaps only what we plant."
- ❑ Sports: "Tell me how to score points before you blow the starting whistle."
- ❑ Country: "My pappy always said, "Don't start shoveling the crap before you know where they want you to put it."

If none of these works, we may be facing the embarrassing situation where the executive does not know what business result will satisfy his or her organizational superiors. The executive doesn't want to admit that senior management has not made their desires clear. While we need to be tactful and polite, the only possible tactic here is one of, "We will both fail if we do not understand what business results will satisfy your boss. Let's find out."

In some organizations asking these questions may seem like a career-ending move. But we need to compare the career consequences of "pushing back" with these questions to the consequences of a failed project. Only in truly dysfunctional organizations are the consequences of the first worse than those of the second. So with a lot of pushy and annoying questions, our impudent project manager secures a clear and measurable scope for the project.

It's tempting to think that the best way to manage our project team from hell is to craft very small achievements and follow-up on their work several times each day. That would be micro-management, in fact, crazed micro-management. Instead, let's think about the likely consequence of a variety of assignment styles with the characters on our team. We'll start with the project team's guru. This individual has already made it clear that the project manager does not understand the highly sophisticated techniques that the guru will apply. And you know something, the guru is often right. Attempting to micro-manage someone whose technical expertise exceeds our own, gives us less control; not more. The guru will be justifiably offended if we try to track small pieces of the work when we don't understand what is involved. So our best assignment style with the guru may be to craft a very large achievement that we hold the guru accountable for delivering. We will still ask for weekly status reports on the achievement so we're not in the dark on progress. We may even find that this style and the trust it communicates get us a higher level of commitment than would be possible with other styles.

Let's consider the situation with our "Techno Wizard" who thinks we can never have enough technology. Our concern here is that they will achieve things the project doesn't need. Technical elegance that produces nothing of business value is pointless. Here our measured achievements need to communicate what's good enough. We "cherry pick" the business problem and ask for "Two-second response time on 80 percent of the transactions." We'll usually find that the cost of the 80 percent solution is half that of the 95 percent solution.

Next let's think about our two high-performers, Marcy and Greg.

Micro-managing people of this caliber only ensures that we get less than their best. We want to give people with this level of capability a great deal of independence to solve problems and figure out how to surmount obstacles. We give them the big achievements in the hopes that delivering on challenging assignments will, in itself, be rewarding for them. Delegating substantial achievements to our most capable individuals also frees the project manager's time for those team members who require more attention. And we do have team members who require micro-management. First, our three trainees will benefit from being micro-managed because they will learn "our way of doing things." Our intent should be to give them very small achievements with frequent evaluation, feedback and coaching in the beginning of the project. As they demonstrate the capability to handle larger and larger assignments, that's what we'll give them. Second, we have a team member who will dig in their heels at any proposed change. Their work on this project will come to a screeching halt at the tiniest obstacle. We need to give them very small assignments and gradual steps to lead this person through the change process. In sum, we are crafting measured achievements for every member of the project team. We make judgments about the size and complexity of those assignments rather than trying to micro-manage everyone.

To learn more about these techniques, visit our website www.4pm.com and look at our PM textbooks, courses and our free project repository of tools, tips, templates and articles.