The Art of Stakeholder Management

PMI Ocean State Chapter

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About Dr. James T. Brown

James T. Brown Ph.D., provides leadership and project management training to companies in the United States, Canada and Europe. He is president of SEBA® Solutions Inc., a Registered Education Provider for the Project Management Institute. His sixteen years of NASA experience included "hands on" as a team member, project manager and serving in executive level organizational leadership roles.

James is the author of *The Handbook of Program Management* published by McGraw-Hill. He has also been published in the *PMI Community Post*, *PM Network*, *PE Magazine*, *Projects@Work*, *The Systems Thinker* and *PM World Today*. A recognized authority in project management, he is a frequently invited keynote speaker by companies and professional organizations on project management areas of interest and leadership.

Dr. Brown has a patent for a project scheduling methodology, and has received numerous awards including "Engineer of the Year" from the Cape Canaveral Technical Societies and is a recipient of the "NASA Public Service Medal" for exceptional contributions to NASA’s mission. He is a member of the Project Management Institute and the National Speakers Association.

James has a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering from the University of Central Florida, a MS in Engineering Management from Florida Institute of Technology and a BS in Electrical Engineering from Tennessee State University. He is a licensed Professional Engineer (PE), a certified Project Management Professional (PMP), and a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP). James is an avid surf fisherman whose favorite activity is catch and release fishing for Roosterfish on the beaches of Mexico.

Contact Dr. Brown at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com if you are interested in bringing him to your company.
If forced to choose I would say project management is 80 percent ________ and 20 percent ________

1. Art, Science
2. Science, Art

The strength of my stakeholder relationships is …

1. Super strong
2. Strong
3. Adequate
4. Weak
5. What stakeholders?

0% 0% 0% 0% 0% 0%
10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

0% 0% 0% 0% 0% 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Super strong Strong Adequate Weak What…
DO YOU HAVE THE GREATEST PROJECT
MANAGEMENT ABILITY?

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

The ability to anticipate is by far the greatest project management ability. Anticipation is an ability that is a culmination of knowledge, experience and skill. The ability to anticipate is not only what separates great project managers from good project managers; it is what separates great from good in most professions. The best hitters in baseball have the ability to anticipate what kind of pitch will be thrown to them and where the ball will be when it is time to swing the bat. The best soccer goalies have the ability to anticipate where the ball will be kicked so they can block it. This really comes into play during penalty kicks and this ability to anticipate will determine the goalies success or failure.

What the baseball batter and the soccer goalie have in common is that they cannot be successful trying to cover every possible outcome. The batter cannot possibly hit the ball with power and control trying to protect the entire strike zone. He has to limit the strike zone to maximize the chances of getting a hit. The goalie cannot possibly guard the entire net. He has to determine what part of the net he will defend and what part will be left unprotected. The batter and goalie that can most effectively anticipate and plan their response to the future circumstances get the best results. This is also true of project managers.

The challenge of project management is so daunting that the project manager’s ability to anticipate and plan has a direct correlation on their ability to execute. A lot of project management books will state that everything needs to be planned in detail and every risk needs to be covered with a risk plan. This is good in theory and for a very small percentage of projects it is good in practice. However, most project managers live in a world characterized by uncertainty. Uncertain requirements, resources, risks, etc. The role of the project manager is to minimize or eliminate this uncertainty, but it is rare when uncertainty doesn’t exist at significant levels. Therefore the best project managers anticipate. They are able to visualize and plan through the fog. They make aggressive decisions based on what they anticipate. The average and poor performing project manager waits on the fog to clear. They complain or whine constantly about the uncertainty and it becomes an excuse for inaction.

The great project managers anticipate then act. The great baseball hitters sometimes swing and miss wildly. The great soccer goalie sometimes leaps to the wrong end of the net. They make mistakes just like the great performing project manager will make mistakes. To anticipate and act means that you will occasionally make mistakes. Over the course of a project, program or career these mistakes will be small compared to the number of good decisions that were made due to excellent anticipation. The successful project manager is a continual learner, not afraid to make decisions based on what they know to be true and what they anticipate to be true.
Stakeholder Management

• Stakeholder satisfaction is more than the quality of the deliverable.
  – The physical characteristics of the deliverable must be managed.
  – The stakeholder’s perception of the deliverable must also be managed.

Stakeholder Management continued

• Assess stakeholder power.
• Handle the problem stakeholder.
• Build relationships with and between stakeholders.
The Truth About Work-Life Balance

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

Odds are high that if you are in an office environment, supporting demanding projects, you don’t have to walk past seven cubicles before you will pass someone totally consumed by their job to the point their work-life balance is out of whack. There is also the probability you may see this person when you look in the mirror. Regrettably, over the course of my career I have been this person.

Two keys to maintain work-life balance in order of importance:

1. Get a Life!
2. Delegate!

1. Get a Life!

I worked for a NASA executive who had struggled with work-life balance to the point that he sought counseling because he was unable to stop thinking about work. After talking to him about his interests, the counselor’s prescription was for him to “build an airplane,” despite the fact that he had not actually flown an airplane in years. Building an airplane to him was so exciting that it put work in perspective and he no longer thought about his work challenges 24/7. He had an airplane to build.

What happy, life activities, do you: A. have; B. enjoy and C. actually do that puts work in its proper perspective?

If you cannot answer this quickly and find yourself doing or thinking about work more than you should you may be a “get a life” candidate.

Recently I had the opportunity to sit down with Space Shuttle Launch director Mike Leinbach a few weeks after the landing of the final Space Shuttle mission. Mike has been launch director since 2000 for 37 launches. Here is an excerpt from my interview with Mike:

James: How do you balance the demands of being Launch Director with family? You have a job that you could spend 100 hours a week here and still feel like “I need to spend more time.” How do you keep that work-family life balance?

Mike: That’s a great question... my wife and I have been married 32 years now, so something must be going right. [laughs] We live on a little farm north of the base, up in Scottsmoor. When I do leave, I’m able to put this place behind me…. I just enjoy getting away. I enjoy work around the farm. I like playing golf. The family never had any kids but we have over the years have had a slew of different kinds of animals. Now my wife is into golden retrievers and agility training through the AKC. She has a dog that’s going to be a champion so I enjoy seeing her excel at that. I’m taking trash out, I’m mowing the grass, I’m fixing a fence, playing with the dogs… this job could be consuming and I’ve found ways of making it not consuming. I think that’s good for my mental health. I know it’s good for my wife. Because it could be overpowering.

Newsflash!!! - If the launch director for the Space Shuttle Program can put his work behind him when he goes home so can you.

2. Delegate!

The second part of Mike’s answer and ability to maintain work-life balance dealt with delegation… his response continues below:

Mike: … a lot of the ways you deal with that, of course, is true delegation. A lot of people talk about delegation, it’s another thing to truly do it. Give people the authority and responsibility and expect them to come through and do the job that they’re given. Guidance – give them guidance of course and give them help when they ask. I’m a real believer in letting a guy make a mistake and let that individual learn from that mistake. I’ve done that on console, I’ve done that in the firing room. I’ve done it – especially through the training sessions in the firing room. You recognize that they’re heading the wrong direction but that’s OK, let them go until they get to the point where you have to course correct. Making a mistake and learning from it is a powerful, powerful tool. The last thing that I ever wanted growing up, either at home or professionally, is someone telling me what to do all the time. You hear a lot about micromanaging – it’s a buzz word – and all that is is the lack of true delegation. Delegation is very, very powerful. Everyone appreciates it.

The work-life balance paradox

Overworked people make more mistakes and find poorer solutions to problems. Some of these problems were the direct result of them or the team being overworked. Their solution to address these problems is often to work longer hours. Because we are less productive we are tempted to work longer and when we work longer we are even less productive… and the cycle continues. Break the cycle, establish a good work-life balance by getting a life and delegating more. You and those around you will actually be more effective, more productive and happier.

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Stakeholder Identification

“Hell hath no fury like a stakeholder scorned.”
James Brown

Stakeholder Identification continued

• Follow the money!
  – Whoever is…
    • Paying.
    • Saving.
    • Costs increases.
  – Follow the resources
    • Every entity that provides resources…
      – Internal.
      – External.
Why Your Project Management Methodology Doesn’t Matter Much

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

One of the greatest debates in project management is what is the best project management methodology? There are numerous articles and books touting particular methodologies. Each usually talks about the deficiencies of other methodologies and uses some version of the high failure rate of projects to meet cost, schedule and scope targets to prove their point. Some methodologies are overtly or covertly backed by vendors and consultants selling software and/or services related to the methodology. I have come across no credible proof of one methodology outperforming another methodology. I hope the following isn’t a news flash...

The methodology isn't the primary factor of success. It is the leadership!

I have a client that was rolling out a new methodology. They had invested substantially in the methodology and training in project management. Early in the process the CIO called me aside and she asked “Will this work?” I responded by saying “It will work if your leaders lead. A project management methodology and educated project managers ultimately escalate issues that require the organization to make decisions and lead.” I am pleased to tell you three years later, all of this client’s projects are in control and they have and are enjoying great success with project delivery. They have a good methodology, but more importantly they have strong leadership to back up their chosen methodology.

Strong leadership with regard to the methodology is much more than mandating compliance to the methodology.

Strong leadership is striking a balance between people dependency and process dependency with regard to the methodology. Too much methodology can contribute to project failure. We must have a balance. Project management is simply Structured, Organized, Common Sense. If uncertainty is high and the requirements are fluid, it is common sense to use an iterative method. If the deliverable is critical and it’s execution and use involves life and death you may want a strict development methodology. There are always trade offs and there is no free lunch. One size does not fit all. PMO’s and leaders have failed trying to make one size fit all.

Strong leadership is also choosing when to violate the methodology.

Sometimes there are circumstances that warrant not following the methodology. The key for success here is that exceptions and violations need to be formally approved by leadership. Without this formal approval individual project managers will violate the process and the process’s integrity will erode over time to the point of being useless (useless… the methodology exists, it sits on a shelf, and we just don’t follow it). The good part of pre-approving and approving violations to the methodology is that the violation requests themselves tell a story about the methodologies effectiveness and how it should be adjusted. Requests to violate the methodology are data that should be used to improve the methodology. These requests will lead you to the natural balance point for your organization’s methodology.

A methodology doesn’t have to be perfect!

Earlier I mentioned a client that showed strong leadership with regard to their methodology and project management. When the methodology was rolled out the leader told the project managers “I am rolling this out and I know it is no more than 80% correct. However if we wait, it will still never be perfect. I want you to use it and tell me what’s wrong with it. Tell me how it can be improved. You have my commitment that I will listen. I will fix what’s wrong with it and I will improve it.” That’s what he did. That’s leadership! That is what made it successful. I have no doubt he could make any methodology successful through leadership.
Stakeholder Identification continued

• Follow the deliverables.
  – Whoever is the recipient of the product or service
• Follow the signatures.
  – The individual who signs off on completion (or phases) of the deliverable
• Examine other projects’ stakeholder lists.

Stakeholder Identification continued

• Review the organizational chart
• Ask team members, customers, and any other confirmed stakeholder
• Look for the “Unofficial People of Influence!”
What does this company know that your company doesn’t?

Multiple Choice: Why did a Fortune 100 company send Dr. Brown to Europe in 06, 07, 08, 09, 10 to train their project managers? Why did he go again in 11? Why? Why? Why?

a. Because they already sent him over ten times in the past four years.

b. Because their project managers and stakeholders understand, believe in, and are motivated to follow project management processes after Dr. Brown’s training class.

c. Because after three years of leadership by their Project Management Office and Dr. Brown’s training all of their projects are now green and in control.

d. All of the above.

Hint: The Real Question is…

If this company is willing to pay for overseas travel expenses ($$$) to cover Dr. Brown’s time while in Europe, and do it repeatedly, why isn’t your organization willing to bring him in for project management training?

Contact Dr. Brown today at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com to discuss your training needs.

“Initially we brought James in for just one class that happened to be Leadership Skills for Project Managers. The class had such a profound impact on my staff that we rolled it out globally to all IT project managers and then added other classes. Usually people have to be pressured to attend training, but James’s classes essentially sell out when scheduled. Most importantly, I see increased proficiency among my project managers that translates to bottom line results.” C. Woodruff, Global CIO of Siemens Energy

Answer —> d. All of the above. (As if you didn’t know) ☺
Know Your Stakeholders Pets

• Pet peeves…pet projects…pet people:
  – All stakeholders usually have one or more
  – Find out
    • What your stakeholders’ biggest pains and worries
    • How their performance is judged.
    • What makes the stakeholder’s customer or boss say the equivalent of ‘good job’ to the stakeholder?”

Stakeholder Communication

• Regular and planned
  – Define upfront
• Not just bad news
  – Take every opportunity to communicate success
    • Good news via email → okay
    • Bad news via email → NOT okay
Why you should never “Dumb It Down” for the Customer

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

I cringed when I heard a project manager say he had to “dumb it down” for a conversation with a stakeholder. In my opinion there is no such thing as “dumbing it down.” There is only effective communication. When someone says or has the mindset of “dumbing it down” they are implying or believe a certain level of superiority. There is more to communication than words. If you have lived long enough you probably have had an encounter with someone who was “dumbing it down” when talking to you and odds are high you felt/feel negatively about that person.

I love statistics and math. A lot of people hate these subjects… usually not because they are difficult but because the teachers they had for these subjects were poor communicators… the difficulty is primarily because of the poor instruction they received. In my experience the best teachers were always the ones who could communicate their points so everyone understood.

Do your communication skills pass the 7th grader test?

If you have ever attended one of my classes you have probably heard me say “no matter how complex the idea/point is we should be able to speak or write about it at the seventh grade level.” If you cannot do that the person whose knowledge is in question is your own… because if we truly understand something we can communicate it in simple terms without leaving an impression of “dumbing it down.”

If you can’t pass the seventh grade communication test, then you need to increase your own level of understanding. Yes… when I say this I sometimes receive looks of doubt from Solution Architects, PhD engineers, PhD geologists and other highly technical people… but equal numbers of highly technical people agree with my seventh grader communication principle. The ancient African proverb “He who learns, teaches” applies here.

Communicating simply is a valuable skill!

This month I attended a conference on “Advanced Analytics” and heard Anne G. Robinson, PhD, Director, Information and Data Strategy Customer Value Chain Management for Cisco speak on how Cisco is using analytics. Anne hires PhD scientists and basically stated: “the key question when interviewing a job candidate for her group is to ask them to explain a complex subject in simple terms.” If they can’t do that they are not a strong candidate because they won’t be able to communicate effectively with the customer which is essential for success.

Strong communication is always on the customers terms!

In fact even though it was a conference focused on “Advanced Analytics,” surprisingly, most of the presenters (who were all high level leaders with technical backgrounds) talked about the importance of people relationships for success. A common failure scenario is to let the focus/euphoria of the tool/data/results overshadow the people relationships.

Effective people relationships require strong communication. Strong communication is always on the customers terms and that is not from a position of superiority. Don’t “dumb it down”…simply communicate!
Stakeholder Listening Tips

- Listen through the noise.
- Distinguish between requirements and solutions.
- Understanding is not always improved by talking to more people.
  - *Who are the right people?*

Assessing Stakeholder Power

- You should know the limits of their power.
  - How much they can hurt you and how much they can help you.
  - Assess their history for using that power.
  - Know what type of power each stakeholder has. Is it positional, influence, expert, charismatic, etc?
Who is the Most Important Stakeholder Group?

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

I recently surveyed five groups of project managers and asked them to prioritize the following stakeholder groups. In alphabetical order they are Community, Customers, Investors, Suppliers and Team Members/Employees.

The average ranking for all of the groups was 1. Customers, 2. Team Members/Employees, 3. Investors, 4. Suppliers and 5. Community. One of the groups had employees/team members ranked number one, one group had investors ranked number one and three of the groups had customers ranked number one.

The variation in the groups was not a surprise. I recently read the book Setting The Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business by Danny Meyer. Why read a restaurateur’s book on hospitality? A big part of project management is stakeholder management, and whenever I can study excellence in seemingly unrelated fields, there are often strong parallels to project management.

Team Members are Number One! Are You Kidding?

Meyer shared how his restaurants began struggling and he had to re-establish his priorities and values. He described his priorities as "Enlightened Hospitality" and it puts stakeholders in the following order: 1. Team Members/Employees, 2. Customers, 3. Community, 4. Suppliers and 5. Investors. He credits this philosophy for turning his restaurants around and contributing to a very successful business.

Fundamental to his philosophy of Team Members/Employees being the most important, is the truth that if the team cannot treat each other with respect, hold each other in the highest regard and work harmoniously with one another, then it is difficult for them to treat the customer with respect, to hold customers with high regard and work harmoniously with them.

Disharmony within a team often migrates to external relationships.

Meyer’s most important concern is how his team members treat each other. This reminds me of some wise counsel given to me long ago…”Take care of your people first, and then everything else takes care of itself.”

It is just disingenuous to treat your fellow team members poorly and then treat your stakeholders well. It becomes an act. An act that at some point that will be exposed for what it is. Meyer believes, and has proven, that his prioritization ultimately benefits investors more.

Investors being ranked last provides greater returns in the long term.

It is a sad commentary and very evident in the current financial markets how focus on the short term ultimately is more costly and sometimes devastating. Two other important takeaways from Setting the Table are below:

1. Judge your staff on 51 percent emotional (attitude and interpersonal skills) job performance and 49 percent technical job performance. You can always teach technical, while emotional is much harder, if not impossible to develop. Lack of emotional job performance skills destroys teams and alienates customers.

2. Employees can be categorized as Overwhelmers, Whelmers, and Underwhelmers. It is easy to identify Underwhelmers and get rid of them. The most dangerous employees are the Whelmers because they tend to stay in the organization longer because their performance is adequate but “they infuse an organization and its staff with mediocrity…and send a dangerous message to your staff and guests that “average” is acceptable.”
Problem Stakeholders

• Chances are high that you will at some point have one or a few problem stakeholders in the mix.

• Problem stakeholders come in a variety of flavors, including the following:
  – The meddlying stakeholder.
  – The overbearing stakeholder.
  – The poor stakeholder.
  – The untrustworthy stakeholder.
  – The indecisive stakeholder.
  – The unavailable stakeholder.

The problem stakeholder I deal with the most is

1. Meddling
2. Overbearing
3. Poor
4. Untrustworthy
5. Indecisive
6. Unavailable
7. I need a new job***

*** My stakeholder is an indecisive, poor, meddlying, untrustworthy, overbearing person that is unavailable.
Are You Spending Too Much Time on Project Administration?

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

Project administration functions are different than project management functions. By administration functions I mean inputting the project parameters into the project management software, scheduling meetings, issuing minutes, compiling and expediting all the documentation and deliverables for the project, and providing the obligatory “courteous” follow-up on late tasks and deliverables.

I would never burden a great PM with administration functions.

When project managers have to manage projects and do administrative functions, it is a very tough task, because the amount of work involved in administrative functions can be overwhelming. The non-administrative project management functions are much more important. Thus, project managers who must do both tend to fall behind, or often they ignore or do not perform administrative functions, especially since the consequences of doing so are delayed.

Everyone doesn’t have time to master sophisticated tools.

The project management software in use today is very sophisticated with a lot of capability. Project management software packages usually add new features, capabilities, or other changes every year or two, which makes the products even more challenging to use. Most project managers understand and can use less than a tenth of this capability—they learn (often painfully) just enough to get their project tasks into the system in order to meet some reporting requirement of the organization.

A two- or three-day class or online tutorial isn’t enough. Granted, the training will provide the basis for building proficiency in a project management software package, but that is true only if you use the tool frequently after the training is completed. The tool is a small part of good project management, and unfortunately, most organizations have their project managers operating on the wrong end of the learning curve. As such, their project managers never get proficient or effective at using the tool.

The tool can be a burden versus something that makes the job easier.

Realize that knowing the tool and performing all the necessary project management tasks is information/capability overload for the typical project manager. In fact, the skill set and natural ability to become proficient in the use of the project management software is different than the skill set and natural ability needed to be a great project manager, which is primarily people and relationship driven. It is a rare individual who is highly effective at both, because of personal preferences and time limitations. Time spent at the desktop with the tool is not time spent dealing with the myriad of project stakeholders.

Splitting the two functions is a strategic decision.

When the functions are split, you have dedicated project administrators who work for and serve project managers. This means you can invest heavily in “tool” training for the administrators and make them experts on your project management software and methodology. Relieving your project managers of the administrative burdens allows them to work on more projects. Additionally, project administrators can serve more than one project manager. For example, very often, seven project managers and three project administrators accomplish more and provide better customer service than ten project managers all doing the project management and the administrative functions.
The Meddling Stakeholder

• The meddling stakeholder is always inserting himself or herself unnecessarily into...
  – Decisions
  – Processes
  – Meetings

The Meddling Stakeholder continued

• Develop “rules of engagement” with all stakeholders, including meddling ones.
  – These rules of engagement may be written or verbal
  – Document how often and what format routine communication will take place for the stakeholder
"The book proved to be a very quick read and loaded with excellent insight into Program Management. The section on Stakeholder management was especially interesting, Dr. Brown describes a ranking system and communication techniques that are extremely helpful. Risk management is also a section that has good approaches for managing a successful program.” Greg Maloney

“This chapter that covered stakeholder management was another excellent chapter that I have since asked all of my Program AND Project managers to read. I did this because it's an excellent chapter on helping the Program and Project Managers to understand what stakeholders REALLY expect of them. Additionally he goes over the types of stakeholders that you can run into and simple yet effective methods to work effectively with them.” Ben Wilson

"The book takes you step-by-step through the basics of setting up the structure necessary for a robust program environment. Where needed, examples and pointers are included, with tips and scenarios throughout the chapters, and the essence of each chapter is boiled down to a useful list of "Keystone" principles at its close.” Calvert Kendrick

...This book was better than a handbook, at least how I think of handbooks. It read very well (unlike my stereotype of a handbook which a choppy, reference guide) and was full of "gems" from real example projects and programs. The other word is "Program". While it's of course true that the book focuses on Program Management, my issue is that it is an excellent book for Project Managers, as well. - Rich Maltzman

"Brown's book captures the essential skills of program and project management. It serves as a "how to" guide for those entering the business, as well as a refresher on the skills and attributes for those ready to take the next step. The book effectively defines the leader's role in creating the team culture and environment for success”. - Eugene F. Kranz, Apollo 13 Flight Director, Retired Director NASA Space Operations, Author - Failure is not an Option

"The book is a very useful and pragmatic approach to Program Management. Dr. Brown provides real world examples and guidance for improving your skills. He also does a great job addressing the leadership skills required to be a successful program manager. A highly recommended read for program managers and those aspiring to be one!” Joe Savage

If you are a program manager, or thinking of becoming one, you will want this book. Dr. Brown shares his wisdom on the program management without overburdening you with methodology. In reading the book, I often felt like I was having a discussion about program management with a knowledgeable and experienced colleague. J. F. Simmel
The Meddling Stakeholder continued

• Assess the cause for the stakeholder meddling
• Listen to the meddled stakeholder to ascertain whether his or her experience may help in any way.
• Assess, strategize, and then engage

The Meddling Stakeholder continued

• Some stakeholders meddle because they lack trust with the project manager
  – Building trust begins with communication and demonstrated competence
  – Expect trust building to take time
• Stakeholders may meddle because they are control freaks
  – Assure they always know the latest
  – If they insist on being involved, involve them
Milestones in Mirror are Closer Than They Appear

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

At the beginning of the calendar year, a common conversational topic is “how fast time passes.” No one has an appreciation for how fast time passes more than a project manager with a tight schedule. Milestones that seemed far away when the project started seem to be accelerating towards you. Because we tend to immediately forget past accomplishments and their significance, milestones that have been completed seem like ancient history.

You can take a breath to acknowledge achievements!

Always take the opportunity to remind yourself and the team of accomplishments, challenges overcome and milestones completed. Take some time to celebrate and acknowledge achievement of the milestone. This helps to build confidence and serves to relieve the seemingly constant pressure of the next project milestone.

Schedule pre-milestone reviews!

You will find it valuable to schedule pre-milestone reviews ahead of the milestone to ensure there are no surprises or hidden issues that may prevent achievement of the milestone. These reviews are typically scheduled two to four weeks in front of the milestone completion date. The situation may dictate a formal team review or you may informally meet individually with team members. By putting this on the schedule it minimizes the “nagging” perception when you follow up…just like a good “nagging” project manager should.

2009 to 2010 is a big milestone!

Some say the holiday season is depressing. Could it be depressing for some because it is a time of assessment? The change over of the calendar, from one year to another, even though it is just another day, causes people to assess themselves. This assessment is good for them and for those companies that sell fitness equipment.

So…just in case you haven’t explicitly asked yourself, “How well did you do as a project manager or team member this year?” Evaluate how well you did: 1. From your own internal feelings; 2. From metrics and 3. By asking your key stakeholders. Analyze the variance among these three indicators. If you don’t have metrics to assess your performance, have them for next year.

Commit to get better!

• Were you a better project manager/team member in 2009 than you were in 2008?
• Was your organization better at project management in 2009 than 2008?
• What goal or capability do you have in 2009 that you didn’t have in 2008?

I challenge you to set goals to achieve in 2010 related to the questions above. Answer the questions ahead of time! Remember in project management, requirements that are not written down are not really requirements and certainly not managed properly. The same applies for goals! If you do not take the time to visualize your goal and write it down, you are limiting (more likely eliminating) your ability to
The Overbearing Stakeholder

- An overbearing stakeholder, because of their power position or personality, can be domineering and put the program at risk
- Seek help with an overbearing stakeholder.
- Make sure the overbearing stakeholder doesn’t ruin other project relationships or teamwork

The Poor Stakeholder

- A poor stakeholder is someone who has interests or is impacted by the program, but who has no significant budget or budget authority
- Poor stakeholders may play politics in order to gain influence
- Do not ignore the poor stakeholder
What is your project’s planning horizon?

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

When project managers are asked the question about the length of their planning horizon, they usually frown in disgust or say “What do you mean by planning horizon?” I define planning horizon as the length of time you can plan into the future with validity. Validity meaning you know what work needs to be accomplished; you know what resources are required for the work that can be accomplished; and you know what resources are available or the work that needs to be accomplished.

Knowledge of the work, the resource requirements and the resource availability enable the project manager to create a detailed schedule.

If one of the three factors above is lacking, a properly detailed schedule cannot be put together. For some organizations the planning horizon is a month or longer. These environments are very stable. Work is planned out in detail and executed per the plan for the month with only minor changes. Still other organizations have a planning horizon that may be a week and the schedule is very stable for that week.

Establishing a planning horizon is a strategic decision for an organization.

Unfortunately it is very common for organizations to have a planning horizon less than a week and in some cases it is less than a day or non-existent. There are circumstances that warrant a very short or non-existent planning horizon and it is not wrong as long as it is a strategic decision, that was made by the organization with full knowledge of its positive and negative consequences. Every organization should establish a target planning horizon based on the kinds of projects, customers, deliverables and services they provide.

Organizations with short or nonexistent planning horizons are very dynamic and usually filled with higher levels of frustration. Unmanaged, this frustration can lead to turnover or worse... employees that just go through the motions because they feel their contributions are wasted by an organization that keeps changing things.

Longer planning horizons also have problems because the schedule is set and a better or more effective way to do something may arise, but the schedule is set. Additionally, longer planning horizons can make it more difficult to respond rapidly to changes.

When it comes to details… once is usually enough!

When it comes to dealing with the planning horizon you only want to plan the details once. What good does it do you to plan the details for three months from now if your planning horizon is three days. Yes, you want to understand as much as possible about what may need to take place three months from now, but unless your environment is stable enough to assure with a high level of confidence that the work that needs to be accomplished, its corresponding resource requirements and the resource availability for the work is known for that period three months from now, there is no point in planning it in detail.

Establishing a planning horizon forces an organization to come to grips with all of the uncertainties that limit the planning horizon.

What prevents you from having a stable schedule for one week? Two weeks? Six weeks? Identify the uncertainties that limit the planning horizon. Some of these uncertainties may be able to be eliminated, some may be reduced and others just have to be dealt with. It is important to understand the uncertainties to establish the planning horizon and then communicate this understanding to the team. When the team understands why the planning horizon is three days or three months and that the planning horizon was established as a strategic decision it reduces the frustration whether it is long or short. It is encouraging to know that your leadership is “thinking” and not just letting things happen in a haphazard way.
The Poor Stakeholder continued

• Understanding of how the objectives of the poor stakeholder line up or conflict with more powerful stakeholders
  – This can be a predictor of future issues
  – This can allow you to leverage opportunities

The Untrustworthy Stakeholder

• The untrustworthy stakeholder will often...
  – Play “both sides”
  – Won’t stand by his or her words
  – Refuse to document anything with a signature

• No magic answer exists for how to deal with untrustworthy stakeholders
  – Fear of accountability, inexperience and/or ignorance can contribute to untrustworthiness.
Seven Actions This Program Manager Took

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

Below is an email I received this month from a program manager in Australia. She graciously granted me permission to reprint her email in its entirety, however I thought it best to leave her name off. It is my pleasure to share it with you in hopes you will find a take-away from one of her seven actions.

I just wanted to take the time to thank you for writing "The Handbook of Program Management". I have been a program manager in software for the past 4 years, and a project manager for several years before that. I read your Handbook for the first time last year, and was very impressed with both your writing tone and the sensible content. I have even incorporated some of your points in the internal project management training I run routinely at my company (with full citation references, of course).

Last week the large program I'm running (definitely not NASA-scale large, but sizable for us) ran into an unusual patch of trouble. We have had issues before, but most of them were foreseeable and mitigation plans were in place. The current problems we're seeing fall into the "wow that was unexpected" and "we're definitely new at this business model" categories, and a few people on the program were starting to panic.

This was a new reaction in my experience (possibly because the teams at my current company are way above average in terms of dedication and passion). I did my best to reassure them about the direction we're taking (and those we're choosing not to take), then spent a few hours over the weekend re-reading your Handbook to see if there were some things I was missing that might get the program back on track faster and/or help the team feel more at ease.

I thought you might like to know the tips that I found the most relevant in this tricky stage, and how I'm going to try them out:

1. Focus the team on positive outcomes - at this week's status meeting I'm going to walk through the key milestones (past & future) again, slowly, and explain why each of these is key to the big picture

2. Clarity - I'm going to go round the table to ask each person (i) what's their chief concern and (ii) what's the "ugly" thing (where they're feeling a lack of clarity)

3. Based on the results of 2. I'll be asking the core program team to come to a brainstorming meeting next week with 3 ideas for <x>

4. Praise - I'm going to ask each project leader "Who would you like to praise & recognize this week?" (in place of the question I normally ask: "What's your team frustrated about this week?")

5. Lessons learned - I'm going to review one lesson learned and one follow-up action from our recent mid-flight retrospective in each status meeting from now on

6. Simplicity - I'm going to remind the project leaders to always look for the simplest solution

7. Risks - I'm going to make more time to be available and listen, especially to the extended program team members. It's easy to rely on the project leaders to escalate risks, but I'm finding that my random appearances at standup meetings and in team areas are a much better source of what's going on at the coalface. This seems absurdly obvious as I type it, but I needed the reminder just the same.

So thank you again for sharing your experiences and advice in such an inspiring and accessible form. If you ever find yourself in beautiful Sydney, Australia I would love to know so I can thank you in person!

Regards,

Personally I like point number 7. Not because of the importance of showing up randomly where the action is.... that cannot be over emphasized... but because of her last sentence:

"This seems absurdly obvious as I type it, but I needed the reminder just the same."

As a speaker and trainer I spend a lot of time and energy trying to find new ways to effectively communicate the absurdly obvious. As leader of people you should too... often the absurdly obvious can get lost in the "ball of confusion" that surrounds projects and programs and it is your job to bring it to the forefront.
The Untrustworthy Stakeholder continued

• All important communication relative to the program and projects must be documented and have traceability
• Keep a history with data (examples and impacts) of untrustworthy behavior or circumstances
  – Use the data to take proactive action
  – This may involve partnering with others
  – Proceed with caution but proceed

The Indecisive Stakeholder

• The indecisive stakeholder...
  – Can never make decisions in a timely manner
  – Cannot remain committed to previous decisions
• Set up processes and structures that clearly communicate when the decision is required and the impact of the decision not being made.
  – Keep a log of these consequences.
  – Establish a metric of lost time due to delayed decisions.
What do they really think about you as project manager?

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

Odds are very high that even though you are highly capable, PMP certified, nice and good looking there is an opportunity for you to improve as a project manager. A significant opportunity! But if you are not looking at your faults from the perspective of others your ability to seize this opportunity is diminished. In the book “Selling the Invisible” by Harry Beckwith he states:

"Even your best friends won’t tell you but they will talk behind your back”

I was conducting a leadership class for the PMI Atlanta chapter earlier this year and we were discussing the importance of getting feedback from your team and stakeholders on your performance as a project manager. Feedback can be a very painful, but as I heard the bestselling author Jack Canfield say “feedback is the breakfast of champions.” A participant in my Atlanta training class said she has periodically used Survey Monkey, (http://www.surveymonkey.com/) to have her team assess her performance as a leader and the results have been very valuable to her.

Recurring feedback works best

Additionally, as you request feedback more often you can see your progress (or lack thereof) in a particular area. It also allows you to address these issues with the group and communicate your commitment to get better. Seeking anonymous feedback increases trust and provides the opportunity for open dialogue where appropriate. People often rally behind a leader that acknowledges imperfection, especially when they see commitment to improve and they become more forgiving of transgressions. Every project milestone is an opportunity to seek feedback on your performance.

Be careful not to overreact to your survey results

People often take for granted the positive and emphasize the negative. Allow time for the survey results to sink in and give them perspective and context. This does not mean you discount the feedback they provided because their perspective of you is very real to them… true or untrue.

Where there is opportunity for improvement, brainstorm ways you can improve

Once you identify ways to improve then do the easiest/smallest improvements first. You will be surprised how small adjustments can make tremendous differences. This is a journey of improvement and too many people want it to be an instantaneous change. Make small improvements then survey again.

Honesty is the best policy

Honestly looking at yourself (warts and all) requires effort. It is easy to go through life as leader without truly assessing your performance from the perspective of others. But, if you are committed to personal growth and improvement, garnering honest feedback is a requirement.
The Unavailable Stakeholder

• The unavailable stakeholder is always “too busy” to participate when their input or approval is required
• It is often unavailable stakeholders who end up questioning or challenging the deliverables at pivotal points when they had prior opportunities to review and provide input.
• Maintain a history of efforts and attempts made to communicate with the unavailable stakeholder.

The Unavailable Stakeholder continued

• Strategies for dealing with the unavailable stakeholder include:
  – Trying to get the stakeholder to delegate authority to someone capable and trustworthy who will be available.
  – Working with the stakeholder to provide a mechanism to allow the stakeholder to make decisions without having to be physically present.
Avoiding Groupthink

Dr. James T. Brown PMP PE CSP

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Oscar Rodriguez who has been CEO of three companies. I asked him what surprised him as a leader. Oscar’s response was “Over the years I have found that good people can groupthink themselves into a bad decision or situation... independently they are good people... in isolation the decisions may be good... but as a whole the decision/outcome may not be the best. Leaders need to step back and do a holistic look and say does this make sense...are we doing the right things... do we have the right skills and competency?”

When you are leading groups keep in mind that members may come to agreement on the wrong decision or course of action to soon and then reaffirm with each other that it was the right decision. The aforementioned is especially true of teams that are close or have worked together for a long time or may have a dominant member. Often groups may not adequately look at the process for the decision, alternative courses of action or the impact of incremental decisions as a whole.

Consider the quote from Edward Russo's book Decision Traps: The Ten Barriers to Decision Making and How to Overcome Them “Groups are likely to outperform individuals only to the extent that productive conflict arises among their members and such conflicts get resolved through balanced debate and careful intelligence gathering…When it doesn’t happen groups are just as likely to err as individuals – and sometimes more so.”

To avoid groupthink you must do two things...

1. Step back and ask the meta-questions about the decision – A good list of metaquestions can be found at this link [http://www.indiana.edu/~koertge/H205/Russo.htm](http://www.indiana.edu/~koertge/H205/Russo.htm). A few of these should be at the forefront of your mind as leader. From the list by Russo they are:

   - What's the crux or primary difficulty in this issue?
   - In which of the key elements of the decision process does it lie? (Framing, Gathering Intelligence, Coming to Conclusions, Learning from Feedback)
   - In general, how should decisions like this one be made? (e.g. alone or in groups; intuitively or analytically, etc.)

2. Encourage productive debate. As a leader you must promote and manage productive debate and multiple points of view. I spend a lot of time in training classes emphasizing the importance of trust in leadership and the necessity to continually build it in your teams. Trust allows your team to deal with conflict more effectively but sometimes it may be a contributing factor to people not challenging each other’s ideas/perspectives adequately which can lead to groupthink.

As a leader you must have the ability to manage and sometimes create positive, open debate within a group to ensure thoroughness when it comes to evaluating a decision.

Management case studies are filled with examples of groups of smart people making decisions that made little sense in hindsight... sometimes to the point of absurdity. Your role as a leader is to ensure this does not happen. Take the extra time to objectively evaluate the decision process with meta-questions and encourage positive debate…especially when the decision seems obvious or there is no other apparent choice.
The Unavailable Stakeholder continued

- Strategies for dealing with the unavailable stakeholder include:
  - Maintaining scheduled meetings and timeframes
  - Ad Hoc meetings may be appropriate
  - Publishing stakeholder meeting schedules well in advance
  - Following up with telephone and email reminders

The hardest stakeholder to deal with is the

1. Meddling
2. Overbearing
3. Poor
4. Untrustworthy
5. Indecisive
6. Unavailable
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The Presentation Skills course was a valuable use of my time. It reinforced the best traits for creating and delivery of a presentation that will get results. The SEBA design of breaking the courses down into smaller segments was great - I was able to address phone calls and emails in between chapters, without losing where I was at in the course. Also the mini quizzes at the end were relevant and reinforced the key points of the chapter. L. Luytjes, PMP, Nicor Gas

“The Change Management seminar is full of terrific information and is presented well. It covers what Change Management is, why it is needed, who needs to be involved, how to go about it, and pitfalls to look out for. The one page document that goes along with the seminar is also very helpful because it covers the major points and a checklist to succeed. I have that printed out and sitting on my desk now. Thanks, James for covering an important topic and a fun & interesting seminar!”

Susan Arnold, VP of Project Management, HowStuffWorks

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The Ideal Stakeholder

- Shows an interest in the project or program.
- Makes themselves available when necessary.
- Assigns qualified personnel to act on their behalf when they are unavailable.
- Willingness to be accountable.

The Ideal Stakeholder continued

- Reviews and signs required documents in a timely manner.
- Tells you their communication preferences.
- Prioritizes their preferences and requirements.
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- Plot Qualitative risks on a risk matrix
- Perform Quantitative risk analysis for project risks
- Perform expected value calculations
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I am walking away from this class course with valuable tools to improve risk management practices. Dr. Brown practices what he preaches – His presentation style and materials were very understandable and usable. K. Buckwalter, State of Michigan

Dr. Brown’s insight into calculating and communicating risk was very valuable. We will be able to use his ideas immediately with our customers and projects. S. Pryor, CommandGlobal

This course sells on my website for $475.00. $475.00 is a good deal! The regular price is $475.00...But because you are in attendance today you can purchase it at the discounted rate of $275!

You can...1. Fax your credit card info, billing and shipping address to 321.577.0210 OR 2. Email Dr. Brown at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com with your intent to order OR 3. See Dr. Brown after the event today to pay by check or credit card. To get the $200 discount one of these three must be done today!
The Ideal Stakeholder continued

- Doesn’t pressure project managers to circumvent the project management process
- Looks for opportunities to provide relief to the project team as appropriate
- Helps motivate project personnel
  – Shows appreciation for good work

Based on the characteristics for an ideal stakeholder my most important stakeholder is…

1. 100% Ideal
2. 90% Ideal
3. 75% Ideal
4. 50% Ideal
5. 25% Ideal
6. Keep hope alive
28 November 2011

James T. Brown, Ph.D
President
SEBA Solutions, Inc.
2802 Bellwind Circle
Viera, Florida 32955

RE: Essential PM Solutions Training

Dr. Brown,

On behalf of the RSA Americas PMO, we would like to offer our most sincere gratitude for bringing your very well received Essential PM Solutions training course to our team. As you are aware the PMO at RSA is a new concept; bringing together project and program managers from across the RSA spectrum. With the formation of a new organization and new team within that organization comes certain challenges.

As we began reviewing prospective training partners, SEBA Solutions’ creative approach quickly became the clear choice for our training needs. We first required an organization that truly understood the profession from a “been there and done that” perspective. In addition, we have a very experienced team that is highly utilized and you worked with us to tailor the course to our needs.

Key to a successful training session was the ability to keep the team engaged. You were able to effectively present material ranging from standard PMI concepts to nuanced and more integral soft skill concepts. As we have a team ranging in experience levels, everyone that participated came away with the same comment. In short, this was the best training that they had taken around project management in a very long time. Dr. Brown, you should be commended on your direct and entertaining approach to the subject matter. Keeping very busy “billable” professionals engaged is no small feat.

From a management perspective, we could not have asked for a more straightforward process. Once we detailed our requirements via a few discovery discussions, SEBA presented a proposal that not only met our time frame but was customized to our organizational needs. Flexible scheduling and availability, along with a price point that rivaled our internal options . . . . the decision to bring SEBA Solutions into our organization became a “no brainer”.

Again thank you for a tremendous session and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,

Christopher M. Allen

Christopher M. Allen, PMP
Sr. Practice Manager, RSA Americas PMO

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B. Price, Senior Vice President, CBC Companies

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