

Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects

How to Avoid Expectation Collisions

Painful Lightning Bolts

Powerful stakeholders often throw painful lightning bolts at projects, seemingly out of the blue. However, these lightning bolts are rarely as spontaneous or unpredictable as they seem. More often they are the culmination of a series of mistakes managing the expectations of these crucial stakeholders.

Experienced project leaders deliberately manage expectations. First, they use their emotional intelligence skills to forge key relationships, establish trustworthiness, and build reputations as a truth tellers. Second, they establish formal project communication systems that keep the right people informed about important project information.

Make Informal Time

1 Build informal relationships before you need them. A colleague speaks dismissively of “the old boys’ club” – an insular, exclusive group of people who control access to information. They informally steer power and perks to each other, regardless of damage to the organization and other employees.

Although old boys’ clubs are harmful, they teach an important message about the power of informal relationships on projects. Formal communication channels such as scheduled status reports and project reviews are not sufficient. People who lead projects must have a strong network of informal relationships with key stakeholders, allowing them to have difficult but crucial conversations at key times during a project.

Informal relationships with stakeholders

are built primarily through talking. In contrast, many project leaders rely heavily on email, written reports, and other less interactive methods of communication. Therefore, when working with key stakeholders, persistently seek out informal face-to-face and phone conversations. These conversations build relationships much better than more formal and written methods.

Relationship building with stakeholders is one of the most important aspects of program management. Realize that relationship building never ends.

James T. Brown

Don’t dismiss this as politicking or cozying up to the old boys’ club. Deliberately set aside time in your busy schedule to talk informally with people. James T. Brown, an experienced NASA program manager, observes “Unfortunately, relationship building is something that novice or technically focused program managers often overlook. They are so focused on the tangible deliverables of the project that they discount the importance of relationship building.” (Brown, *The Handbook of Program Management*, p. 65-66)

Why Should They Trust You?

2 Be trustworthy – all the time. If stakeholders suspect your trustworthiness, whether in things small or large, they won’t listen to you when you have something crucial or difficult to say. Being trustworthy is not simply being conscientious. For example, you

may know that your automobile mechanic is very conscientious, but you still wouldn't trust him to perform open heart surgery.

The moment there is suspicion about a person's motives, everything he does becomes tainted.

Mahatma Gandhi

SMR Covey breaks trustworthiness into four components. The first two are character traits.

1. **Good intent:** A trustworthy person has good intent, whether or not he or she is able to act on it.
2. **Integrity:** A trustworthy person speaks honestly, with actions that match the talk.

The second two are situational. They change from project to project.

3. **Capability:** The person (or the project team backing the person) has the knowledge, skills, and resources required to produce the results that the customer or stakeholder desires.
4. **Track Record:** The person or project team has previously applied similar capabilities to successfully produce results similar to the desired results. (Covey, *Business at the Speed of Trust*, p. 20, 25, 43)

Project leaders must continuously invest in building up all four components for themselves and their teams.

Impossible to Misunderstand

3 Become known as a truth teller. Don't settle for conveying just the facts when you set expectations and communicate difficult project news. Communicate so clearly that you can't be misunderstood. Building a reputation as a tough-minded but fair truth teller is the only way to build your credibility and maintain your integrity.

The best way to communicate difficulties to customers and managers is simply to present them with the facts ... Putting off bad news is rarely good for you or your project. The impact of the bad news is likely to grow and damage your credibility.

*Eric Verzuh, Fast Forward
MBA in Project Management*

Endpoint

To survive tough projects, project leaders must excel at managing expectations. They must deliberately forge informal relationships, establish trustworthiness, and be a truth teller.

This is necessary, but not sufficient. In the next article, I'll describe how to complement this with formal project communication techniques that keep stakeholders informed about important project information.

About the Author

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