"PROJECT RESCUE:"

"There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure."

—Colin Powell, American Statesman and (retired) Four-Star General in the U.S. Army

A Mindset for Collaboration

By HEATHER MEEKER GREEN and RACHEL DIGIAMMARINO

STUDIES BY STANFORD Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune 500 CEOs found that 75% of long-term job success depended on people skills and only 25% on technical skills. Add to that the reality that today's workforce is facing greater complexity and constant change in virtually all industries—aggressive competition, increased workload, challenges of communicating in a matrixed and global organization, rising economic pressures to be more efficient, and on and on.

In this VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) environment, there is an immense opportunity to develop and hone the competencies that support individuals as they navigate these challenges. At the core is a need for interpersonal savvy that includes the ability to communicate well and develop effective relationships based on principles of trust and value. This is separate from the technical communication skills that you use to perform your jobs well. It is about your ability to build self-awareness and capacities to negotiate, persuade, resolve conflict, have successful conversations, give effective feedback, and demonstrate personal leadership and engagement on the job.

That's a tall order for sure, and while you're not computers or bots who can be programmed for 100% uptime and accuracy, as humans you can strive for self improvement, utilize your analytical skills with a filter of accountability and empathy, and find value in both the tangible and intangible qualities that enhance human interaction and lead to better, more collaborative outcomes.

A Project-Management Scenario

Let's take a common team assignment that could involve a variety of technical communication roles. A new Wiki is being introduced to replace an outdated tool that was initially created for the client services unit when the company was a lot smaller and people got things done virtually any way they knew how under a few basic guidelines that were recorded for posterity. In light of rapid growth, the focus is on efficient and scalable solutions, which means providing staff with standard operating procedures that accurately reflect current and approved intra- and inter-departmental processes that are also customer-centric.

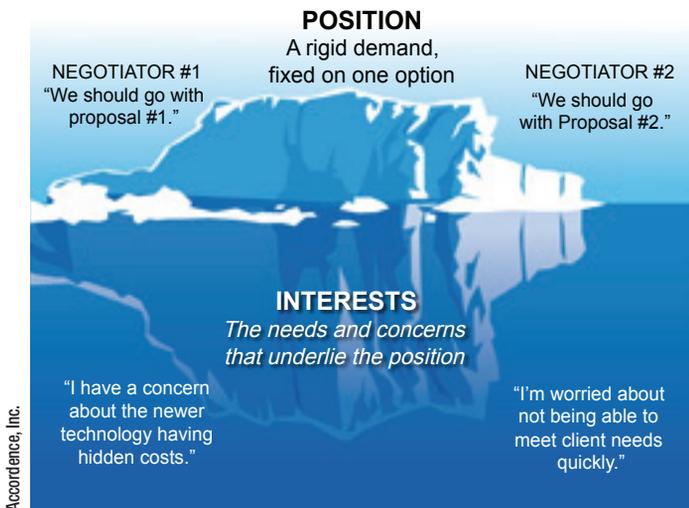As a member of the project team, you might be naturally concerned about the impact of:
▶ Unclear project goals
▶ Unrealistic deadlines
▶ Lack of accountability
▶ Waning stakeholder engagement
▶ Inexperienced/unassertive project leader
▶ Insufficient skills

In an effort to not let the prospect or reality of any or all of these challenges cause a complete derailment, let's look closely at three essential practices that can help all members of a project team get in the mindset of collaboration. Project rescue begins!

1. Leveraging Interests

We know that project teams (even if exclusively made up of internal parties—i.e., no vendors/consultants) are complex, multi-party undertakings. They involve tangible resources—time, money, and people—and intangible resources—trust, honesty, and reputation. Moreover, they involve working relationships that are continually evolving. Just because you're on the same "team" does not equate to common goals, aligned expectations, or even mutual respect right from the start. One skill project teams require is to be able to come to agreement well.

In our experience interviewing, coaching, and assessing thousands of professionals who have followed our curriculum, there is a foundational element that can help foster positive direction when a project team needs to reach agreement: leveraging interests.

POSITION
A rigid demand,
fixed on one option

NEGOTIATOR #1
"We should go with
proposal #1."

NEGOTIATOR #2
"We should go
with Proposal #2."

INTERESTS
*The needs and concerns
that underlie the position*

"I have a concern
about the newer
technology having
hidden costs."

"I'm worried about
not being able to
meet client needs
quickly."

What lies beneath? It is essential to get below the surface of positions.

How often have you sat across from someone who was seemingly resistant to the options presented? They state their position, they posture and are pretty inflexible, forcing a response, and you never really understand their needs, motivators, or concerns. And how often have you actually shared yours? In order to truly grasp what problem the team is trying to solve, you must know your and everyone else's interests, otherwise you're treating the symptom (i.e., *position*) and not finding a cure for the root cause (i.e., *interest*).

Get in the habit of asking yourself and others "why?" For example, "why do you feel that three weeks isn't enough time to complete a first draft?" It is essential to recognize what you and they want/need, and to take an honest inventory of one's underlying interests when you engage in a collaborative endeavor. Arguably, these are subjective interests, tailor-made to a person's situation, expectations, and experiences. In most cases, the openness and confidence with which you speak about interests is worth more in terms of being able to creatively brainstorm relevant options versus guarding your true interests and presenting an intractable position that may bring things to a standstill, foster resentment, and ultimately create an imbalance towards "win-lose" or even "lose-lose."

How might the responses vary if, instead of the position "it can't be done in that much time," the person indicated, "I'll be on vacation for one of those weeks" or "I have a major deadline for another project that same week" or "my ability to complete the draft is dependent on the scheduling of interviews with account managers who have end-of-month quotas in the middle of this." Unearthing and leveraging the important interests of all parties is a more direct path toward mutually satisfying outcomes.

Understanding one another's interests can also strengthen relationships and build a higher level of trust. The more authentic you are, the more you cultivate a deeper relationship status, and the lower the potential for assumptions to get in the way and misunderstandings to arise. The willingness to share information and the genuine curiosity to understand inspires trust. As you know more about people's interests, you're likely to increase the efficiency of your conversations and negotiations by leveraging common interests to reach agreements faster.

2. Broadening Perspectives

Another essential practice for minimizing misunderstandings and creating collaborative environments on project teams entails broadening your perspectives beyond your own in all of your interactions. Most of us come to meetings or conversations thinking about what is important to us and view the situation from our perspective alone. We may only focus on advocating our interests, get stuck in positions, or experience others doing so. For a holistic picture of the situation and better results, view the situation from three perspectives—third person, second person, and first person.

To start, act as an observer or fly on the wall and look at the problem from a neutral place. The objectivity you bring with this perspective may highlight something new that will allow further collaboration.

Once you have acted as a witness to the situation, next put yourself in the other person's shoes and consider what might be important for them, especially from their role on the project team. When you try to see how they might think or feel, again you may become aware of valuable information, stimulating creative ideas to solve the problem or empathy for better understanding of your team members. Asking questions of other people and really listening to their responses to learn more from this perspective will open up possibilities you may not have reached.

Having viewed the situation from the third and second perspective, you can return to first-person perspective and advocate and share your viewpoints and needs. Doing so honestly and genuinely will be more influential. Due to a psychological principle of reciprocity that motivates us to reciprocate when someone has done something for us, you are more likely to be heard when you show curiosity and empathy. If you listened well to another person, they often feel compelled to do the same. By bringing all three perspectives to your team meetings and conversations, you develop a stronger understanding of the whole picture and increase the likelihood for solving problems more easily and effectively.

3. De-escalating the Tension

Whether your team gets off to a rocky start, or sprints out of the gate only to go off the rails at some later point, there is a need to get back on course so that failure is not a foregone conclusion. Tension is virtually unavoidable when deadlines are looming and resources are limited, so learning how to de-escalate it is the third essential practice for a collaborative mindset. When you learn to work through conflict, you develop innovation and creativity, strengthen relationships, and build trust.

Several strategies you can enact yourself when conflict arises in your relationships are drawn from life lessons shared by Grande Lum, negotiator, professor, and author

of *Tear Down The Wall: Be Your Own Mediator in Conflict* (Optimality Press, 2013). In some scenarios, tension may get triggered in you, but you have the fortitude to not make it transparent. While that tactic may work in the short term, the effects can be fairly taxing and ultimately that pent up frustration comes out of you. When the inevitable occurs, and you find yourself needing to mediate your own conflict, it is important to make conscious choices rather than just unleashing automatic reactions.

It's Me, Not You—First, think about how you may have contributed to the problem at hand. It's a natural tendency to immediately go to all of the ways the other person created the conflict. Pause to consider what you may have done or were perceived as doing and how that may have triggered the other person thereby escalating the tension. With this self-awareness, you can take the next step of moving past the underlying shame or self-criticism you're feeling, which many of us have underneath our anger or frustration. As each side's behavior in the problem becomes clearer, you can take accountability to diffuse the situation.

Talk About Your Talk—There are two tracks that are happening in conflict. There's the subject of your disagreement and there's also the context in which you and the other person(s) are engaged in conflict. It should not be surprising that the way we talk can ignite tension more than the content of what's being discussed. Naturally, then, a key to resolving conflict involves extracting the "what" from the "how" and addressing each person's perspectives and needs around both.

Use Demands As Clues—When you pause when having a reaction to someone's demands and act more like a sleuth, you can develop an easier process for mediating conflict. Their demands are clues to what's actually driving and motivating them and what their underlying needs are in the situation. Stop lobbing your own demands back at them and instead, become an investigator. Listen and then ask questions to help you understand their side of the story.

Affirm the Positive; Ignore the Negative—Showing appreciation to the other person is an invitation for them to model your behavior. Affirmation is something most people crave and it sends a collaborative signal to the other person. Finding something positive in what the other party says helps turn the corner on the conflict dynamic by creating a more promising, optimistic conversation.

Accommodate Without Caving In—Accommodating comes from a desire to support, to achieve harmony, to be liked, and to sidestep perceived pain. Be open and generous when it comes to interacting and communicating with the other person, while staying assertive and tough on the problem itself.

Know When to Respond and When Not to Respond—Fight or flight responses have their advantages and disadvantages. Fear and avoidance of fights may cut off crucial topics that need to be addressed. Conversely, reacting in the moment and unleashing your temper may worsen the situation. Consider the timing and your audience. A frank conversation may not seem ideal but you can work toward

constructiveness. Resuming the conversation even after a short break provides a calmer context in which to focus on mutual interests and creative options.

A Collaborative Mindset Is a Strategic Mindset

Consistent effort to communicate with others on your team, outside of, during, and post-project, all have measurable value in cultivating relationships that tip the scales in favor of a desire to collaborate. Remember that the time to develop, nurture, and repair working relationships occurs well before you actually need them. And yet, even with the best laid plans, the reality is we're all human and we need to factor in that there will be an emotional component to manage at some point in the process.

Rather than responding to someone's negative tactics or disengaging completely, employ this more strategic approach by shifting your mindset to focus on ways that ignite collaboration—leveraging interests, broadening perspectives, and de-escalating tension. By taking the initiative or responding in kind, you show a level of accountability for your behavior and actions (or inactions) that engenders the same from others. It's not about being perceived as the perfect writer, developer, designer, and so on, but rather how you use your awareness and perspective to address the missteps, misunderstandings, and other obstacles to achieve a win-win outcome.

Ultimately, successful projects are part art, part science, and require a combination of interpersonal and technical competencies. It is important to highlight that any member of a project team can initiate as well as follow these strategies for successful communication in projects as they are not intended just for project managers/owners, supervisors, and executive sponsors. Recognizing when a project has gone awry and using collaborative practices to tear down the "walls" that divide the team is the best way to a successful rescue. **i**

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