

Strategies for Survival

In a highly political environment, there are opportunities for success or failure. Your successes depend on your abilities to exploit opportunities. As a manager, you have several strategies that you can use to exploit circumstances. These are:

- Divide and conquer
- Cooption
- Alliance building
- Powerbrokering
- Spread responsibility
- Scapegoating
- Cooperation
- Filibustering
- Sacrifice the future for the present

Divide and conquer

This strategy is effective for dealing with the project team. Occasionally, a team member, especially if you have no formal authority over that person, will challenge your position. Using the divide and conquer strategy, you can assign tasks that have team members depending on one another to complete. Throughout the project, team members will be too busy resolving issues between themselves rather than trying to challenge or usurp your position.

For example, you may have a team member with a strong personality, someone who argues and refuses to deliver according to schedule. You can assign that person jointly with one or two other people to complete tasks, or you can assign that person to tasks where others depend on the output. Peer pressure should entice that person to complete tasks. If not, you can then use that person's behaviour as the reason for removal from the project. The danger of this strategy is that you could destroy team unity if taken to the extreme.

It is also an effective strategy for dealing with the client. If, for some reason, an important member of the client's camp is (hostile towards you or the project, you should make friends with another significant party in their community. You then rise that association to challenge the opposition. If the original opponent complains, you can recognize their concerns but politely mention that they do not speak for the entire organisation. You want to keep them fighting among themselves rather than with you. Naturally, you must avoid being caught in the crossfire of having both sides turn on you.

You may elect to try this strategy with your own management, but do so carefully. You could play one manager against another. However, you might also find yourself on the losing side and 'out the front door' or cause indecisiveness resulting in severe delays in the project.

Cooption

With this strategy, you simply make friends with your opposition via common goals. You do that by fulfilling mutual. Short-term interests, thereby lessening potential damage from the opposition.

Perhaps a team member absolutely loathes working for you. To resolve that problem, you can strike a 'deal' with the employee. Tell that person, for instance, that in exchange for Cooperation, you will help to enhance his or her career. Just do not promise too much, especially if you cannot be sure to deliver.

When dealing with the client, you might also find cooption useful. Perhaps the opposition in the client's side to your project has ideas for a more ambitious project. You might agree to help by slowing down the success of your project in the hope that you and your team will receive a more ambitious project. While nefarious, this tactic can lead to more lucrative work. If handled poorly, you could be without a project.

If you are having problems with a senior manager, you can try to persuade that person to think differently. Explain how the project may help solve that person's immediate pressing problems, then, the manager at least may find your project beneficial.

Alliance building

This strategy is similar to cooption but with one difference. You build a strong relationship with friends.

This strategy works well regardless of whether you make your alliance with someone on the client's side, your management's, or your project teams.

Few project managers realise the importance of making allies of other project managers.

Under certain circumstances, you might make an ally of another project manager by identifying your project closely with another one.

You might do that for several reasons. You might want to associate your project with a more powerful one, hoping that you will share in its visibility. Your association with that project might also lead to greater resource allocation or at least shared resources with a favoured project.

A project might have a smaller budget and, consequently, less people and supplies than other projects. However, the project manager can tie in his project with one of the bigger ones. Some ways to achieve that is by sharing resources or providing the output of his project as the input to the bigger project.

Alliance building can prove hazardous. Being allied too closely with another project may prove detrimental especially if your ally falls into disrepute. Then you will have to disassociate your connection with that ally to protect your own project!

Powerbrokering

Here, you are taking advantage of the circumstance where two or more parties are fighting with one another. As a project manager, you can exploit this in several ways.

You can play the peacemaker. For example, two or more project managers are fighting for management's attention. You then create the image that your project is in the interests of the company while the other projects are seeking their own interests. Then you appeal to the other project managers to set aside their self-interests for the good of the company, making sure that management hears you. Management may later reward you and your project with greater visibility and more resources, even at the expense of the other projects.

Sometimes, you might avoid the role of powerbroker, especially if the odds of withstanding an onslaught from the fighting parties are minimal. You could easily find yourself in a 'Beirut' environment, where you are attacked from all sides. The key is to know when the time is right to relinquish the role of peacemaker or avoid it completely.

Spread responsibility

Periodically, you may elect to share responsibility for your project, especially if the outcome is precarious.

A common way to spread responsibility is by sharing resources with another project. Such resources might be people, equipment, and data. If something goes awry, such as a schedule slide or a decline in quality, you can attribute part of the problem to the other project using your resources.

Still another way to spread responsibility is to encourage more participation in the decision-making process. For instance, you may entice members of higher management to make critical decisions for you. Then, if the project faces problems, management will be less likely to chastise or admonish you for the results. After all their decisions contributed to the negative outcome, and they are unlikely to admonish themselves.

A common approach on projects to this is having someone assume responsibility for waiving a requirement or specification. Making a unilateral decision could prove fatal to your career. If

the client refuses to yield on an impossible requirement then you can go to senior management to make the decision. That way, you keep a low profile in the entire circumstance and senior management will receive the negative pressure.

In addition, you may involve the client or your project team. Receiving their participation effectively spreads responsibility, thereby lowering the chance for complaints from either party over a particular decision.

Spreading responsibility does not absolve you from the ultimate responsibility for the outcome of the project. You alone carry that burden. But spreading responsibility can make managing your project easier. That will happen only if you spread responsibility without losing control of the project.

Scapegoating

Somewhat akin to spreading responsibility is Scapegoating. It means blaming the other person for your problems, thereby absolving yourself from any responsibility. In the context of managing a project, this strategy can work very well. You simply blame someone or some organization for your project's problems.

For instance, you can blame the client for not cooperating with you. Perhaps they did not provide enough support for the project to proceed according to plan. Or you can blame senior management for not providing adequate support to complete the project successfully. This technique can prove especially useful if you had earlier identified shortcomings, and you can now point the finger at someone else rather than at yourself. You can blame poor project performance on your team or on certain members of the team. Perhaps you were assigned people whom you did not want in the first place but senior management forced you to accept them. You can also blame poor performance on some remote but understandable factor such as a downturn in the economy or the poor quality of employees hired into the organisation.

Although often quite effective, Scapegoating is the tool of a weak project manager. Blaming others for your problems can easily be detected as a smokescreen for your own inadequacies as a project manager. Also, it can create enemies, which is something you should try to avoid at all costs.

Cooperation

This strategy, unlike the previous one, involves making friends. Here, you help other project managers to succeed if they do the same for you. That may entail sharing scarce resources or covering for the other project manager's mistakes. It may even mean slowing the progress of your project to avoid embarrassing other project managers.

A project manager might consider lending a team member to a project that requires a certain skill. Or he might give the other project manager's team access to data, machines, facilities, etc. for a short period.

Sharing of such resources not only contributes to eliminating redundancies but also strengthens the project manager's hand. People become indebted to him.

Cooperation with the client, your management, and the project team has tremendous benefits. Each party works for the support of the other. The danger of failure, or its consequences, lessens. Mutual support rather than negative competition becomes the norm.

Yet too much cooperation can lead to mediocrity. All parties start covering for the other and negative political approaches, such as 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours', become more important than the projects. The consequence is extreme conformity and marginal performance. Such a collegial atmosphere will invariably frustrate the most competent and talented individuals and encourage growth of the political project manager (who may not be the most competent and talented person).

Filibustering

With this strategy, you delay progress of your project as much as possible until the delay itself becomes to your advantage or no longer becomes advantageous. For instance, you may delay your project to secure greater funding for the next fiscal year. Or you may delay your project to hurt or embarrass another project manager needing your project's output. Another reason is to avoid prematurely terminating your project, such as appearing to finish the project earlier than expected and, consequently, finding yourself seeking another project.

Filibustering works only to a point and can cause you real trouble. Unless you can attribute the delay to something everyone can relate to and they believe you, you may receive blame for the unsatisfactory performance of your project.

Sacrifice the future for the present

This strategy is employed just about everywhere, including the corporate boardroom. In the world of project management, it is also a prevalent strategy. Indeed, sacrificing the future for the present is a way of life in project management.

You may elect to reduce your resources to adjust to budget constraints and simply disregard the long-range impact of your decisions. In other words, you fix the current problem and deal with the consequences later (or better yet, let your successor deal with them). Or you may make everyone work extensive overtime to meet a schedule date, knowing that later on the budget will overrun and employee turnover will rise. Thus, sacrificing the future for the present will work - for a while.

'Quick fixes' are common on projects. Due to the presence of deadlines, budget constraints, and other factors, project managers will do what they must to deliver the product to the client - hence, the deplorable quality of some products, like software. In the short run, the client gets the product within budget and on schedule. In the long run, the client has a product that only a rocket scientist could understand and a chess grandmaster could maintain.

You can face serious consequences by pursuing this strategy. Not only do you endanger the potential for a successful project but you narrow your own chances for success, too. All you are doing is placing a Band-Aid on a wound when a tourniquet would be more appropriate. Usually short-term solutions lead to long-term problems on projects.

Politics is a reality

Project managers do not operate in a vacuum, void of politics. The presence of politics is inescapable in any business. The project managers who succeed are not always the best and the brightest but the ones who work smarter and not necessarily the hardest.

Admittedly, some of the strategies listed above appear sinister, even unprofessional, and they are. Yet, project managers (capable as well as inept ones) employ them every day. That does not mean you must use them. Nothing can replace project managers who are honest and direct in their dealings with their customer, their management, and their team. Nonetheless, even these project managers have to survive and, unfortunately, may have to 'use the tools of the devil to defeat him'.

Taken from "The People Side of Project Management" Gower 1992 R Kliem & I Ludin