

I'll Take Purple Please - The Big Game of Project Management

By Laura Bollinger-Moore

It's football season again and around my house, that means packing up every weekend for tailgating and a day spent at U.C. Berkeley (Cal) football games. This behavior continues until late November, when it all culminates in The Big Game – the football game between Cal and Stanford University. For some members of each school, there is great animosity between the schools... for example, if you wear red (one of Stanford's colors) to a Cal football game you will most likely have several students and young alumni chanting "take off that red shirt!" until you give in and remove it (point to note, if you're a female or modest at all, wear a shirt under the red shirt, or just don't wear the color red to begin with!)

The thing is, I married a Cal man, but I didn't myself attend Cal. I almost did, and I also almost attended Stanford. So truly, I see the benefits and the downsides to both universities, and although I may be looking at divorce papers after saying this, I think both schools are wonderful. In fact, when you combine the strengths of the two schools, you fill in for many of the weaknesses and find synergies that not only benefit the students, but the world in general (when you look at the research they conduct, this is not an understatement).

Here's the thing – Cal has blue & gold for their colors; Stanford has red & white. The primary colors there are blue and red, which mixed together make purple (the significance of which will be explained later).

Think about your projects. Consider each milestone as a game along the way to the big game, which will bring you to the final play in the final game that is your project, landing you either in the throngs of victory, or the depths of defeat.

This may sound a bit grandiose for a project, but let's go back to college football... every Saturday game requires the playmakers to strategize, to know their opponents (for a project, their risks, roadblocks, etc.) and to build their team up for victory in spite of sprained ankles, mid-terms, undesirable weather, or whatever may come up during the season. By careful strategizing and precision execution (though sometimes just by dumb luck), the team wins their weekly battle, and moves forward in victory with confidence for the next week. If this sounds like your project team, you're probably doing an awesome job, your project is exactly where you want it, and all of your stakeholders are happy.

But if the strategizing is not careful, and contingencies not thought of in advance, the team moves forward with defeat after defeat, building up to meet their biggest and most important opponent while experiencing a lack of confidence and enthusiasm. If that's your project team, chances are you are behind on your project and your stakeholders are maybe even looking for a new PM, or even a way out.

Now consider if there was a place where cooperative teams could get together and share their information. This would never happen in football because it defeats the purpose of a game, however, project management is not a game, and collaboration is absolutely a viable option (obviously it would need to be either other teams w/in your company, kept very high-level so no proprietary information is leaked, or under non-disclosure agreements).

On a previous project, I had team members from several organizations, but from organizations that had not worked together before and were a little suspicious of each other. My projects at the time always dealt with mess-ups, and were generally classified as "unsolvable" through normal channels. That is, someone somewhere did something wrong, or a system was causing unexpected consequences (usually the program was exactly to specifications, and it was the specifications that were not thorough enough – thus... human error) leading to some results detrimental enough to cause Leadership intervention through my team's oversight. I then had the opportunity to come in with a team of specialists and "clean up the mess", with the full weight of Leadership behind the team, with the goal of cleaning/clearing the issue, regardless of age, within 30 days. Some of these messes were quite large, and you can imagine that if the players were not all communicating and being forth-right about their area of expertise, the progress of the project would be delayed and might even be driven down a side track that would waste precious time and resources.

On any project it is imperative that team members are open and honest about their field of expertise. Holding back information is detrimental to a project. Sure, no one wants to be the one to whom the finger of blame is pointing, but the truth will be known eventually, and knowing the whole picture earlier in the project will allow for a more thorough and solid resolution and project completion. There is no way to have a successful resolution if the full issue is not completely disclosed up front.

But how do you make your team members feel okay about being open and honest, when the error may have been within their team (due to their own work), and when some of them may have never worked with you and/or other members on your team previously? And how do you monitor this, especially when working with virtual teams?

I'd like to take you back in time, when email wasn't quite as prevalent. Back then, there was this device that people use to use all the time. It had a base with a key-pad, and a piece that lifted up that you placed against your ear and near your mouth – yes, it is the phone! I think that in our email and IM world, the art of the face to face and/or phone conversation has taken a serious back-seat, and that projects can suffer because of this. The thing is, no email can replace human to human conversations. If you are working with a new team member, pick up that phone if he/she is not in your location, or if he/she is in your location, take a walk to their desk and introduce yourself. That does wonders for building the relationship and establishing trust.

Additionally, if you notice that someone seems hesitant, or as if he/she is holding something back, gently ask them on the team call if appropriate, and then if you don't get the answer you expect, talk with the person after the call one-on-one. It could just be that the person is not sure their data is relevant and so doesn't want to speak up, or maybe they can't get a word in with all the other very engaged participants, or a myriad of other reasons. You can discover those reasons by having a one-on-one conversation. A little bit of a side note, if you have a team member who isn't talking much on the team calls, touch base with them and find out why. It could be that they have little to contribute at the time, or it could be that they are holding back; the only way to know is to call them and have a personal conversation with them... reaching out like this could gain you many benefits including additional insight, not to mention the enhanced relationship between you and the team member.

By having all of your team members fully engaged and sharing information, you, as the PM – the playmaker – are more able to assemble the data to present to the team so that a much stronger strategy can be developed. Only by everyone participating fully can this happen.

So why purple? There's the obvious – red and blue make purple; by pulling the best of both, and the lessons learned from previous experiences, the team/project becomes much more solid and prepared to truly succeed. Also, purple is the color of excellence, specifically, according to Merriam Webster online: Purple definition #2 : of notable excellence or magnificence : **SPLENDID**

By combining the sources and fully utilizing all of your resources to their fullest extent, learning from each other's lessons learned, expertise, and creativity, your project will be in the purple; excellent, magnificent... splendid. Now, I say that's a game worth watching! Go PURPLE!

About the Author



Laura Bollinger-Moore

AT&T



Laura Bollinger-Moore, PMP, M.A. Social Psychology, MOM, has an eclectic background that includes not only her work in the Telecom industry in such fields as Project Management, Regulatory, Human Resources, Customer Service and Operations, but also outside of Telecom as a Clinical Psychology Researcher and a Social Worker. Currently, Laura is a Senior Research Analyst in Consumer Competitive Intelligence at AT&T, managing multiple simultaneous research projects and providing foresight into, and analysis on, trends and fads, as well as cutting edge upcoming technology. Laura lives in California with her husband Lorin, and their two amazing daughters Lily Faye and Layla Blue. Laura can be contacted at Laura.b.moore@att.com