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Advisory

Working with a Bad Project Manager
by Harold Kerzner, PhD and
Al Zeitoun, PhD

WORKING WITH A BAD PROJECT MANAGER[1]

Harold Kerzner, Ph.D. and Al Zeitoun, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Most project management textbooks have sections, and even chapters, on how project managers must deal with difficult or incompetent team members. Now, let's turn the coin to the other side. How should team members deal with a project manager that is either incompetent or difficult to work with? Are there any remedies for team members?

BACKGROUND

Today, in many companies, project managers have the luxury of being able to request or even select the members of the workforce they want as part of their project team. This is especially true if the project manager has worked with them on previous projects. There are situations where people may have the right to refuse an assignment on a project, but generally they have no choice. Project managers want to be sure, if possible, that the assigned workers can handle the responsibilities needed to make the project a success. If the project manager has never worked with certain critically skilled workers previously, he/she may collaborate with other project managers that had the resources assigned to their projects.

Workers, on the other hand, almost never have a choice of which project managers they will agree to work with, and likewise no input into selection of a project manager for assignment to a project they must support. However, workers need not go into a project assignment blind, so to speak. They can talk to other teammates that have worked for this project manager previously to get a feeling of what they can expect and how they might be treated. If you find yourself assigned to a bad project manager, or one that is difficult to work with, you are certainly not alone. If situations like this have happened previously, there may exist company policies on resolution of issues and escalation criteria to senior management.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A BAD PROJECT MANAGER: _____

Project managers are expected to create project cultures that are aligned to the corporate culture and contribute to project success. Unfortunately, some project managers create project cultures that benefit hidden agendas, self-interests, promote team friction, induce stress, lack effective communication practices, fail to engage team members effectively, micromanage, and generate confusion. Even the appearance of as little as one or two signs can make expected success difficult. By understanding the signs of a bad project manager, team members may be able to develop strategies for overcoming the challenges and increase the likelihood of project success.

Before discussing the actions of a bad project manager and how to overcome them, it is important to first validate that the project manager is in fact incompetent. On some projects, many of these actions may have been necessary due to circumstances we do not know about or because of the qualifications and performance of team members on other projects mandated these steps. The person may have been assigned as the project manager because of special skills and had never attended any project management courses. Also, the project manager may have been pressured to act this way by superiors, project sponsors, or influential stakeholders. We must have some degree of assuredness that the project manager is bad or incompetent and not simply our perception of them at this moment. Team members agreement of bad behavior may be necessary before we act.

Many of the signs of a bad project manager could be mapped to communications or expectations management topics and include:

- **Poor communicator**: The PM refuses to communicate effectively with team members. The PM does not clearly articulate instructions, expectations or priorities and often does not provide all of the information needed by team members. The result is confusion.
- **Sharing information**: The PM may withhold important information provided by clients and stakeholders for fear that the team members may need to communicate with them, thus reducing the importance of the project manager position.
- **Lack of feedback**: The PM is a poor listener and ignores asking for feedback. If feedback on questions is provided, it does not happen in a timely manner thus creating delays and possibly chaos.

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- **Obsession with meetings**: Some PMs believe that they must consistently have firsthand knowledge of project status and schedule more meetings than are necessary.

- **Obsession with documentation**: Some PMs believe that what is not documented has never been said, Team members then spend an exorbitant amount of time writing reports, papers, and memos that few people read.

- **Criticism**: The PM's response to questions asked by teammates or when giving advice is provided as personal criticism of the individual rather than in a constructive criticism format.

- **Know-it-all**: The project manager believes that he/she has all of the knowledge needed for the project to be a success and may prevent team members from displaying or sharing their knowledge.

- **Setting unrealistic deadlines**: The PM may establish unrealistic deadlines that, if successful, will benefit the PM personally. If the deadlines cannot be met, blame will then be placed upon team members.

- **Problem-solving and decision-making inconsistency**: All critical decisions are made by the project manager, often with no input or recommendations by team members. The rationale for the decision is not explained to the team and the PM might change the decision frequently. If a decision must be made that might reflect poorly upon the project manager's abilities, then the PM may ask team members to make the decision for the assignment of blame.

- **Resistance to change**: The PM may resist making necessary changes if the change might remove the PM from his/her comfort zone.

- **Lack of delegation and micromanagement**: The PM is obsessed with controlling every detail of the project personally, thus limiting innovation and creativity opportunities by the team.

- **Lack of accountability**: The PM is reluctant to assign accountability to team members and the accompanying authority they might need. Yet the PM will try to blame others if the work is not being performed as planned.

- **Lack of empathy**: The PM is reluctant to interface with team members on a personal basis and views them as merely a "cost" to be removed from the project as soon as possible.

- **Conflict management**: The PM may refuse to address conflicts constructively thus increasing team friction.

- **Providing credit**: The PM may try to take credit for accomplishments made by others. Very little credit is provided to team members.

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The existence of these issues can certainly destroy morale and make team members feel that they are not trusted to perform their assignment on the project.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER _____

Working with bad project managers can and will be challenging. However, being persistent, understanding your options, and performing them in the right order will allow you to overcome difficulties.

Steps you can take include the following:

- *Establish good communication practices*: Simply because the PM does not communicate well does not prevent you from using good communication practices. This includes making sure you understand what work you are expected to perform and asking questions for clarification if necessary.
- *Document critical communication*: Be prepared to follow up on all critical communication issues with the PM with e-mails, memos, or other means of correspondence. Maintaining documentation is necessary.
- *Understand the facts*: There may be reasons why the project manager is acting this way. See if you can identify the underlying causes.
- *Keep a journal*: Based upon how your challenges will finally be resolved, especially if you need to involve Human Resources and senior management, you will need documentation to support your claims. You should consider maintaining a journal to document everything.
- *Stay calm during conflict negotiations*: Trying to improve working relations with a bad project manager will most assuredly create conflicts to be resolved. You must maintain your composure and calmness to prevent the situation from becoming worse. Always maintain an optimistic and positive mindset. Focus on solutions to the issues rather than the issues themselves. Controlling your emotions is a high priority. Several conflict resolution meetings may be necessary before any change takes place, if at all.
- *Seeking out team member support*: Changing the attitude and leadership style of a bad project manager by yourself will be difficult, if not impossible. Gaining support from team members, especially those that have similar issues interfacing with the PM, is mandatory. To do this, you must practice empathy with your teammates, build trust, and promote an effective project culture. Do not badmouth the project manager because you may not know where your words will end up.
- *Seeking out mentorship*: Trying to resolve the issues first with just the project manager is best. However, if that fails, seeking out a mentor or approaching senior management may be necessary. Mentors can provide you with guidance on how

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to deal with a bad project manager based upon their past experiences and knowledge. They may have ideas that you did not consider. They may also have strong recommendations as to whether senior management should be involved.

- ***Escalating issues to senior management****:* If the steps you take are not improving the situation, as a last resort you can escalate the issue to senior management for resolution. However, before doing so, there are two steps you must consider. First, you must have all of the facts including concrete examples of the issues and be sure that you have sufficient documentation supporting your claims. Second, you must have a backup plan that considers possible repercussions regardless of whether senior management agrees with you. The backup plan should include a continuation of updating the journal if things do not improve.

THE PATH FORWARD _____

This topic of a bad project manager is not widely addressed, given the typical limited choices the project team members have. In the future work environment, where collaboration is increasingly a critically expected team dynamic, this topic has got to be treated as a strategic risk. Senior leaders and project sponsors should be making this topic one of their accountability radar focus areas. Bad project managers are a reflection of the entity's couture within which team members are operating.

Protecting your job, reputation and career, while maintaining your professionalism, should be your primary concern when dealing with a bad project manager. Maintaining complete records of issue may be time-consuming but necessary. You must also document your accomplishments and achievements under these circumstances as well as recognizing that this can be an opportunity for you to improve your skills.

You may continue to be under some levels of stress if you continue to work with bad project managers. You may have no choice. You must maintain control over stress and prevent it from interfering with your home life.

Using this type of an unfortunate situation as a learning opportunity, especially learning from what not to do, allows the team members to equip themselves with the leadership and communications qualities they should possess as they potentially move into this role in future settings. Experience-driven future organizational cultures won't afford having these bad project managers and will naturally give rise to leaders who exemplify the inspirational leadership necessary for the high degree of agility in tomorrow's workplaces.

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Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.

- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.

- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.

- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.

- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.

- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the $40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at zeitounstrategy@gmail.com