In our business we have all kinds of reviews: financial reviews, strategy reviews, technical reviews, test reviews, design reviews, baseline reviews, etc., etc. I hate them all—every last one. It's not because they aren't necessary, but because of how we do them. None is more often bollixed-up than those that involve the government and contractors. Here are some ways to avoid the most common pitfalls that I find specifically in these kinds of reviews.

I hate reviews!

Make sure the right people are there

Take care to avoid those people who come to reviews regardless of how little they have to contribute or how little they have to do with the project. I think there are out there a host of donut-eaters and coffee-drinkers that are professional reviewers. It's like a big social occasion for them. They get to offer a snide comment here, add a little humor there, extend the breaks and, for sure, make

by Terry Little

certain everyone understands how clever they are. Long ago I learned that the first thing for me to do at a review is to ask each government person who they are and why they are here. If I don't get a satisfactory answer, out that person goes before we ever start. Sometimes I do have someone give me an OK answer, but I find out during the review that the person is just being disruptive. Out. I know that sounds harsh, but the truth is I usually only have to do it once and the word gets out that reviews on my programs are serious, intense and not for the curious bystander.

Being adversarial is not what it's all about

The purpose of reviews is to exchange information freely, openly and completely. It is a dialogue among team members—members who share a common goal. It cannot be an "us-versus-them," or else the information flow will cease. Nothing cuts off communication faster than having an environment where people feel defensive or threatened. I think of government-contractor reviews as peer reviews. To emphasize the team nature of reviews, I make it a practice that government people give roughly half the presentations in any review. I also do not allow any government-only caucuses. These create suspicion and encourage "behind-the-back" assertions. In my reviews anything worth saying is said in open forum.

This is not the time for big surprises

I have been dismayed by how many formal reviews I have attended where government people actually working on the project are surprised by what they are hearing from the contractor. This should never be. Formal reviews are for people outside the project, not for those working on it. People working on the project should be getting continuous, real-time information from their counterparts as the project progresses. If they are depending on formal reviews to get their information, then they are not doing their jobs. Formal reviews should be old news to the people actually working the project.

Separate the real issues from apparent ones

I wonder how many reviews fit the pattern of "nothing came out of the review but the people who went in." Reviews should be action oriented. Where issues arise, someone needs to be accountable for resolving them. Part of that accountability stems from meeting a deadline.

The project manager should decide what issues or concerns merit follow-up. Just because someone has an unanswered question or a concern, it doesn't necessarily follow that there needs to be an action item. There are a lot of "nervous Nellies" out there who want everything tidy and complete. In this business they will often be disappointed. The project manager must weigh the criticality of the issue or question against the cost of resolving it. At times, we have to accept some risk and move forward, leaving time and events to resolve certain issues or questions.

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Boring does not make for a good review

Nothing is worse than reviews that are too long and too boring. I frequently see excessive detail that most of the people present don't care about or need to know. This is the project manager's fault. Every agenda item in a review and every view graph on that topic should be of interest to and comprehensible by 80% of those in attendance. The way I accomplish this is to discuss beforehand the purpose of the review with my contractor counterpart and to carefully review the agenda to see that it fulfills the purpose. I also go over with my counterpart the attendee list to make sure that what's presented is what the attendees are looking for. My view is that a formal review should not last more than a day. Anything beyond that tends to get into weeds. One can better communicate weed-like detail in an informal setting to a small group, where there is an opportunity for back-and-forth discussion without disrupting others and where time is not lost by preparing some formal presentation.

REVIEWS ARE A NECESSARY EVIL. THEY CAN BE VERY PAINFUL, but they don't have to be. It just takes a little planning, some courage and an abiding belief that there are better approaches than just letting them happen like they always have. •