The Impact of Fear on Project Success

BY FREDERICK MANZER

Have you ever thought, "This will never work, but if I tell management they'll fire me"? Have you suppressed information, such as a growing estimate at completion, to prevent unwanted attention, criticism, or help? Would you pad an estimate to ensure you could meet promised numbers even when things do not go as planned? These may be understandable responses in your organization, but they are destructive to the people, the project, and the organization. These "fear" responses substitute self-protection for the honest communication that brings long-term success.

You may be in a fear-based environment if one or more of the following are true:

- Assignment of blame begins the problem resolution process.
- Bullying or making threats is part of task assignment.
- "Real" numbers require significant scrubbing or cutting.
- Unpleasant surprises typically accompany final project activities.
- Problems always show up first as history.
- Excuses are not authorized.
- Personal objectives tie to project results the individual does not control.
- Avoiding blame for failure equals success.

Changing the performance focus from "avoiding failure" to "achieving success" requires attention to behaviors as well as results. Results are the product of correct behaviors.

Fear and Management

Some managers use fear as a tool to force action. They set tough goals (usually around cost or schedule) and pressure people to meet them. Some of the common fears that affect project work are

- Criticism—Enissophobia
- Making decisions—Decidophobia
- Neglecting duty or responsibility—Paralipophobia
- Failure—Atychiphobia or kakorrhaphiophobia
- Imperfection—Atelophobia
- Punishment—Poinephobia
- Being ridiculed—Catagelophobia or katagelophobia

Fear-based management can motivate people to work hard, especially in the short run, but it often leads to protective behaviors that undermine projects. Projects proceed without reported problems and continue to forecast success even when failure becomes certain. One software development project I reviewed suffered from poinephobia, the fear of punishment. The team reported performance as exactly on cost and schedule until the customer discovered only 70 percent of the requirements were addressed. Once the problem was identified, the team admitted it had manipulated the performance data to show good performance and avoid punishment from the project manager. This misinformation caused a delivery delay of nine months while the required functionality was added.

Fear-driven self-protective behaviors include

- Hidden reserves—Individuals pad their estimates to ensure they do not fail for reasons beyond their control or to insulate against reduced budgets (atychiphobia);
- Manipulated performance—When variance from the baseline causes penalties, then data manipulation becomes the approach (enissophobia);
- Hidden problems—Shooting the messenger creates a lack of messengers, not a reduction in problems (poinephobia);
- Ignoring risk—If the risk identifier becomes the owner or is branded as "negative," then risks remain unidentified (atelophobia).

These phobias often originate in the popular objective- or results-oriented management approach. Managers increase pressure and determine whom to blame instead of finding solutions. The individuals, meanwhile, focus on avoiding blame and creating good performance reviews. The outcome is continuous suboptimization of the projects, high stress, and unnecessary project failure.

A Wiser Alternative

This management-by-objectives process holds individuals accountable for results beyond their control. Once individuals

cannot control their results, fear takes over. It's better to focus on what they can control: Are people doing the best they can? Can they provide you with better data and better decisions sooner? Creating inspiration instead of fear to challenge your team's performance requires an alternative approach based on two changes.

Responsibility Assignment

Every stakeholder contributes to achieving project outcomes. A customer who sets unreasonable objectives, a salesperson who accepts them, a manager who fails to recognize problems, and a worker who does not make his best effort become equal participants in failure. Rather than holding the worker ultimately responsible for the failings of all, each stakeholder must accept and correct his or her share of the cause.

- If the customer objective is unattainable, tell the customer.
- If marketing makes undeliverable promises, hold them responsible, not the performers.
- If development requires special tools or people, assign them or do not expect the required results.
- If integration and testing requires six weeks, it will still require six weeks even if inputs are late. Cutting time results in a poorly tested product.

Solving difficult problems requires open and honest communication, a frank—and fearless—discussion of the problems and alternatives available under the circumstances. By focusing on the inhibitors—the things that will prevent success—and getting the right people to remove them, success becomes possible.

Behavior Management

Success requires identifying and measuring desired behaviors as well as results. Known as process management when managing the quality of products, whether hardware or software, the same rules apply when managing people. Inspiring the right behaviors produces the best possible results. Challenge people to find solutions by asking, "What can we do to make this happen?" instead of reiterating that the deadline is important. Reward innovation and imagination. Never punish honesty. When the fear of failure is removed, individuals will accept greater challenges and managers will receive better information. In the end, it's important to remember that people can give their best effort, but they cannot always guarantee results.

More Than Outcomes

It's important to set performance goals based on effort, not on how a project turns out. Changing the environment requires trust and communication. People should feel safe in identifying their fears, concerns, and risks and asking for help. This will not only inspire your team to focus on prevention rather than correction and speak up early if they foresee problems, but it can also lead to personal growth and organizational success. Removing fear removes limits and challenges your team to think outside the box instead of locking themselves inside it. ●

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