

Correcting People Problem Requires Preparation, Part 1

ALAN NICOL, Executive Member, AlanNicolSolutions LLC

By ALAN NICOL, Executive Member, AlanNicolSolutions LLC



Let's face it, sometimes we just don't get the cooperation we need. To lead our way past problems in which people don't do their part, we need to prepare for the possibility in advance.

We have all experienced a situation in which someone we counted upon to help us let us down. We have all been that person, too. In the realm of business and process performance improvement, we have that problem often. The reasons are many.

Many times, people don't mean to let us down, but are simply given too many responsibilities or tasks and too many priorities. Sometimes people aren't committed to the changes we are driving toward and, therefore, don't produce the effort or follow through we need. Sometimes people just plain resist.

Regardless of the cause, as change leaders, we can't afford to have team members fall short of following through. The fight to effect change is difficult enough when our projects succeed. Failed efforts just give resisters and those "on the fence" more reason not to commit to the new way.

I like a quote from Nicollo Machiavelli's philosophic essay, *The Prince*. "It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, more dangerous to manage, than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institutions, and merely lukewarm defenders in those that would gain by the new ones."

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I don't share his insight to frighten us from trying to institute new ways. I only wish to affirm the difficulty of the task recognized by an innovative thinker of the turn of the sixteenth century. I like the quote for another reason. Imbedded within it are clues to the success of such unlikely programs. Namely, the elements to successfully driving change are planning, and managing the institutionalization.

I have written before about planning and managing the institution of a system, and I will write more. For now, let's focus on planning and managing the committed participation of team members on our improvement projects.

Naturally, the best way to manage fallout from team members who disappoint is to prevent the phenomenon. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as true control, and that is especially true when it comes to people. Our best efforts to prevent disappointment cannot guarantee it won't happen. We must be prepared for the fallout if the disappointment occurs. Fortunately, the two efforts are basically the same.

To build a plan to prevent and manage we must understand the causes so we can address them directly. There are many, but we can simplify the list into a short group of categorical phenomena:

1. Resource shortage (people are overcommitted or given conflicting priorities).
2. Uncertainty or shortage of faith.
3. Resistance.

Let's address each one. Project and program managers, who mentored me through my various efforts, or to whom I turned when I needed help, taught me the methods I'll describe. They are tried and true, and many will be familiar. Don't dismiss the insights because they appear known already. The important message is that we must proactively address the three above phenomena. What I offer are some ways to do so.

Ideally, we want to hand-pick our teams for difficult projects. Sometimes they are assigned to us or we must accept personalities because of unique skills or experience. We are lucky to have passionate volunteers ask to participate. Regardless, there is significant risk of resource or time commitment conflicts.

No matter how we get our team members, be very clear and deliberate, in written form, concerning the expectations of time commitment we need or expect each team member to produce. Talk it over first. Arrive at an understanding and then follow up with a written summarization. In some environments it is appropriate to create a written agreement complete with signatures. There can be power in contracts.

Go at least one step further. Ask your team member to clear the commitment with his/her leader. Get confirmation that he/she did so. Also, inform your team member that you will share your written agreement with his/her leader to ensure that there

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is no misunderstanding.

Do it in a way that is not threatening. Make sure that your team member understands the reason is to make sure that his/her leader also agrees to the terms and will commit to ensuring that the team member is enabled to keep his/her commitment. You are keeping the resource-management booby trap at bay, not showing a shortage of trust. Make sure this is clear to you and to your team members.

Do not cc your team member's leader on an e-mail containing the written agreement for time and deliverables. We must not expect our leaders to promptly read and digest every, single e-mail, much less the ones directed at someone else and not specifically to them. Talk with or meet that leader directly and go over the e-mail or printed agreement. Get a commitment.

If or when the commitment starts to fall off or break down, we can have a meaningful conversation to correct the problem. Of course, this means that we must also be engaged and following through with the assignments and expectations we issue our team members. We have set an expectation, both with our team members and with their leaders, that time and effort will be committed. Professionalism dictates that they should tell us if that agreement must change, ideally before it changes.

So, if our team member is unable to provide the time and effort committed, we can talk to them. Seek first to understand the problem. Is it temporary? Has the team member and his/her leader already addressed it and produced a solution? Try to help your team member address the problem between the two of you first.

If the problem is not just a hiccup or is not addressed, offer to go with your team member to talk with his/her leader to resolve it. Be polite and respectful, but remind the leader of the commitment and ask for help to resolve the problem. Be helpful, not demanding.

If the team member's leader cannot help you resolve the problem, it is time to go to your own leader and ask for help. Give your leader, if you haven't already, a copy of the written agreement to work from. Sometimes, if two leaders work together to re-set expectations on their mutual resources for an effort that is important, they can arrive at a solution and save your project.

Tune into the Chemical Equipment Daily for part two of this two-part piece. What's your take? Please feel free to comment below! For more information, please visit www.bizwizwithin.com [1].

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