

Go Public to Nail Down those Resources

How do you manage projects in an environment of scarce human resources? People living up to their commitments is key to project success. However, many commitments for the provision of the human resource are broken often with the excuse of scarcity and unavailability due to more pressing issues. The tips below explain how a good approach to prospering in a resource-scarce environment is to go public.

Typically, organisations have more projects underway than they have capacity available to deliver them in an orderly and consistently way. The result of this lack of planning at the organisational level is that project managers are constantly battling for resources, especially those of the human variety. And this situation is not likely to change soon with an ever increasing level of restructurings, downsizings, not to mention shortages of skilled workers.

Obviously, how a project manager manages allocates and uses the resources that are available is key to addressing the resource issues. The efficiency of allocation and usage is very much dependent on planning skills. This is a given. But how else can a project manager survive in this kind of environment? The answer is to go public. Focus on negotiating commitments and put them on the (written) record.

This can be a two edged sword however, and the more public the project manager goes, the more accurate the planning needs to be. Putting everything public, may result in the project's dirty linen and failures also being public.

The first step in going public is to make sure that the work assignments, or work packages as they are known, are developed to the correct degree. You know when a work package is correct by testing it for the following characteristics:

- Can the work package be allocated to a responsible department, section or contractor?
- Can the work package be estimated with a level of accuracy that is acceptable?
- Can a business owner be identified for the business benefit that the work package will create?
- Can a set of business objectives be specified for the work package?

If the answer to all of these is yes, a basis exists for going public.

The first step in going public is to be able to allocate the work package to a responsible department, section or contractor. This is the beginning of getting public commitment. The project manager will negotiate with the responsible body to identify the skills required and the type and number of resources required.

Negotiation is not complete until there are names on the table. Not just names of those who will do the work but also the name of a single individual that will be responsible for the delivery of the work package. With the names agreed, the second step in going public is complete. If the work package is being done by an outside contractor, it will be public by default in the form of a legal contract.

The next step is to agree with the responsible body how it will be known when the work package is completed and is fit for its purpose. This is where the importance of specifying business objectives for the work package comes in. Consider the following example from an IT project. One of the work packages will deliver a new server that will host the database for the new order managing system. A set of business objectives for the 'Install Server' work package in an IT project might look like the following:

1. The availability of the application will be 98.75% of the time.
2. The system will highly secure with tiered levels of access and functions.
3. The number of order management transactions processed per hour will be not less than 5000.

The specification of a set of business objectives that are quantifiable and measurable provide the basis to test the work package. If the work package can be tested, it will be possible to verify that it meets its objectives and is fit for its purpose within the wider project.

All of the steps in going public are nearly in place. To recap, we have a ring fenced work package with an agreed responsible body who has been party to negotiations on how the work will be done, by whom, when, and how it will be recognised that the work is complete and fit for purpose.

The final step in going public is to make all of this visible. Visibility of roles, responsibilities, and agreements are the key to getting and maintaining commitment. As a verbal agreement is not worth the paper it is written on, it is essential that the commitments are documented and communicated. Document, circulate, review, revise, circulate and revise again until there can be no chance of misunderstanding and no escape clauses exist.

To survive in an environment of scarce human resources, the project manager must plan accurately and turn those plans into a set of public commitments. By going public and creating public commitments, it will be more difficult for the named individuals to renege. When the pressure comes on, and choices have to be made, public agreements will be more likely to be honoured. And those public agreements that have the widest and highest visibility will be honoured first of all.

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