



Project Management Public Relations

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Overview

There is a strong element of selling in Project Management. Project management is usually about change and change almost always strikes resistance. The Project Manager has to sell the change, and prepare those who will be impacted to accept the change. A good Project Manager will always be asking “How can I use this activity to sell the project? What should I be doing to prepare people for the change?” This white paper sets out to explore some public relations strategies.

Involvement

I was working with a new Project Manager recently. She had prepared initial requirements for a software purchase and I suggested a workshop to run the requirements past the users. The company had two main branches and she convened a workshop in her branch. Her response after the workshop was that there was nothing significant that had come out of the workshop so she was not going to run a workshop in the second branch. She was quite pleased that she had managed to get the requirements right and that had been confirmed by the workshop.

I realised that I had not properly communicated the reasons for doing the workshop. It was not just about getting the requirements right. It was also to get buy-in from the end users. To allow them the opportunity to contribute. To allow them the chance to see what was being proposed and set the context for the change.

If the software was purchased without their involvement, it would seem to be imposed. If they were asked before about what they wanted, it is much more likely they will accept it readily.

Information Dissemination

A Project Manager usually sees their project as the most important thing in the company. They want to circulate detailed information to all concerned unless of course it is going pear shaped. In that case they may want to tell nobody. If it is going well there is the temptation to circulate lengthy documents to people who are only peripherally involved, or think they are peripherally involved. They might actually be heavily affected by the change. If the document is too big, they probably will not read it.

Another approach is to make a short press release style document which gives the highlights. For example:

Project XYZ Update

- Milestone for tender release achieved on 20/2/10
- Workshop for acceptance criteria to be held on 18/3/10. If you feel you should attend contact the Project Manager.
- Major issue raised regarding staff shortages for roll out. Sponsor to hold a meeting on Tuesday at 2:30 to discuss.

- New budget for the completion due on 25/3/10
- Project Manager visiting Branch ABC all next week.
- For more information, contact the Project Manager. A full report is available from

The document above will probably be read by most people. If they want more information, there are a number of ways to obtain it. They can contact the Project Manager. They can download the full report if there is a download link. They can ask to attend a meeting. They can follow up with the Sponsor after the meeting to discuss the issue.

PR is different to a specification. PR is about getting you interested enough to take the next step. If you see a press release about a new TV, it might cause you to look up the specifications. A press release about a new model car might make you look up details on the Internet or visit a dealer if you are in the market for a new car. Similarly a press release about a project can trigger further action.

Social Gatherings

I know some Project Managers that see team celebrations as a waste of time and money. They reach a major milestone and just want to focus on the next milestone. Team gatherings have a purpose. In fact they have two purposes:

- Acknowledge the efforts of the team
- Provide an informal environment where issues can be discussed.

There should however be a third goal. They are PR events. It is a way to promote the project to the people outside the team. Invite a few key people outside of the team. You do not want to overwhelm the team numbers but two or three key people from outside the team can start to see what the project is all about, and get to hear the experiences of the team.

Here is an example. I was running a project years ago which was not viewed as particularly complicated by a key senior stakeholder. She had made comments about why it was taking so long and hinted it was a consultant (me) making the job as long as possible to maximise my revenue. I had very little access to her as I worked through her managers.

I invited her along to a team lunch on the premise that it would be good for the team to see her support for the project, and it gave her an opportunity to see why it was taking so long.

I had booked a restaurant for 1 ½ hours. At the end of 2 ½ hours she was insisting people stay as she was learning so much about the project. She had no idea of the complexity of what we were doing. It all seemed simple from the outside.

One comment she made was that she did not see why we had to spend so much time on business process analysis. It was as though she had thrown a grenade. Her business area had been the source of major business process inefficiencies. The team pointed out in no uncertain terms that their investigation had resulted in the saving of many thousands of dollars to her department. Those savings would happen even if the project stopped today. It appeared we had identified the inefficient processes to her managers and they had never told her that the problems existed.

During the whole lunch I said very little. I left it to the team to point out what was happening. At the end of the lunch I was invited to the stakeholders office for an informal chat. Following that event a few things happened.

- She became a keen supporter of the project.
- I had access to her whenever I wanted.
- Her managers became much more cooperative although some of them did so through gritted teeth.
- A few other barriers at a senior level seemed to suddenly disappear.

All this through a bit of public relations.

Public Relations and Communications Planning

These are two different things. A project may have a communications plan, but not necessarily a PR plan. How are they different? A communications plan is based on who needs to know what, and when do they need to know. A public relations plan is based on whose support do we need, and how do we ensure they provide that support.

If you have a project that is going to require a strong sell, consider a PR plan to compliment the communications plan. Whilst a communications plan is providing what people want to know, a PR plan is providing what you want them to know. They go hand in hand.

PR Events

There are multiple sites on the web that can provide a list of potential PR events. Here are just a few odd ones I have seen over the years that are applicable to projects.

Handouts.

Consider branded merchandise to raise the profile of your project. It can be something as simple as mouse pads or pens, but it does create a reminder for your project. If you are moving offices on a certain date, distribute stickers to your customers with the new contact details.

Sponsorship

A project to refurbish an office building resulted in sponsorship of a social club event. At the event, they build a mock up of a workstation with the new furniture and furnishings and asked for comments.

Experts

A project to roll out a new system took a group of selected users and spent a few days training them well before the roll out. They became the “Group of Experts”. Their workstations had a sign above saying “I am an expert. Ask me.” Through regular briefings and including the experts in progress reviews we made them the spokespersons for the project to the rest of the staff.

Prizes

To encourage people to complete online training, we gave a prize for completion. Completion included an online test which they had to pass. The prize was a shopping voucher but just the fact they were rewarded for their work was a great incentive to support the new changes.

Conclusion

Not every project requires a PR campaign. Those projects that will be a difficult sell do however. Look closely at what you do in the project, and decide if it can be framed in a way to support the desired outcome. Even in a project that you might not consider being difficult to sell can have activities that, for no extra effort, can become PR activities.

The Author

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About Project Perfect

Project Perfect is a project management software and consulting organisation based in Sydney Australia. Their focus is to provide organisations with the project infrastructure they need to successfully manage projects.

Project Perfect sell “Project Administrator” software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called “Method H”™, and sell software to support the technique. They also sell a complete web based methodology for [software package selection](#). For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au