

Picture the scene: you've recently been appointed the project manager of an important project, involving a variety of people and groups over whom you don't have any direct authority. You've called your first project team meeting and most of them have turned up, or at least sent along a deputy.

There you are in the conference room. You've gone through the traditional bonding ceremony where everyone gives their name and brief biographical details (except the chap on the far side of the table who gave a full life history starting from his apprenticeship) and now you want to resolve the key question: "how much help are these people going to be — who's really on my side?"



IT TAKES all Sorts

By Rod Gray

A group starts off as an "aggregate cluster of persons"¹ and becomes identifiable as a group when "interactions" occur among the members and their awareness of their common relationship develops. The urgent task for the project manager is to identify the characteristics of the individual components of this particular aggregate cluster and take appropriate action to ensure that their activities in the project team are positive rather than negative (as seen, of course, from the project manager's point of view).

The reason why this is an urgent task lies deep in the evolution of man as a social animal in that branch of science/magic known variously as group dynamics, or "that touchy-feely stuff they do to interrupt the real work on management training courses".

Readers will no doubt remember Bruce Tuckman's² five stages of group development: Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing, followed in due course by Adjourning (or Mourning, because adjourning doesn't rhyme when said in an English accent). Your chance to establish your authority over the task (authority over the *team* is a different and far more complex issue) comes in the Forming stage. You, as the one who called the meeting, "own" the territory (the conference room) and can set the tone for the meeting. Most of the people will be relying on "safe" behaviours based on patterns tried and tested in similar situations and will be avoiding controversy. Writers other

than Tuckman have used the term "Polite" to describe this phase of group development and there is strong psychological pressure on the attendees not to rock the boat. Even if a troublemaker who has attended a behavioural science course (clearly subversive behaviour in itself) deliberately tries to be disruptive, the effect is likely to unite the rest of the group in opposition.

Most of the challenges will come during the next phase — Storming — when competition and conflict arise both in interpersonal relations and task-related matters. Before this you should have learnt as much as possible about the individuals on the team and prepared your contingency plans for moulding your "aggregate cluster" into a productive project team. Hopefully, identifying the needs and concerns of individuals and genuinely trying to address them will be sufficient for most situations.

Machiavelli³ offered the logically sound, if cold-blooded, advice that a leader should identify anyone likely to oppose him and comprehensively zap them before they become a nuisance. This may be a little extreme in our situation. However it is wise to identify some of the more common types of disruptive influences, and consider how you might establish a meaningful and productive relationship with them.

One word of caution: although you see and hear what the people at your meeting do and say, you can never really be certain *why* they behave as they do. Your observations are subject to a phenomenon known as Fundamental Attribution Error, or FAE (see Figure 1).

This can lead you to make assumptions about people's personalities which may be quite unjustified, so try to be as detached and objective as possible about team members. Base your reactions on facts

rather than inferences. The following are a few of the characters I've met in various task-groups. You will probably recognise at least some of them — you may even be one yourself!

THE MATRIX MARTYR

These are probably the characters you are most likely to meet in one of today's streamlined organisations. They have

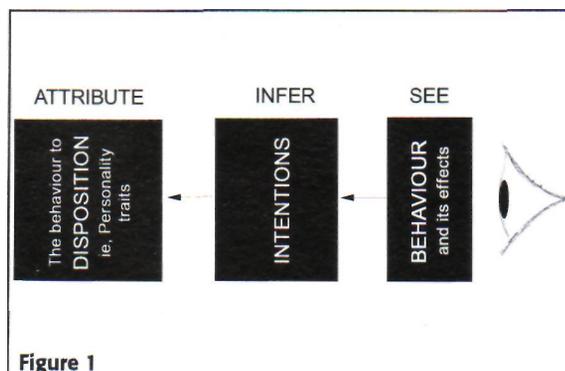


Figure 1

come along to the project meeting because their input is vital and their departments will carry out much of the work.

Unfortunately, their bosses have other priorities and, while they really want to contribute to the project, their resources are stretched just that bit too far. So, do they please the boss (appraisal, bonus, continued employment) or do they please the project manager (benefits unclear)?

Faced with these people on the team the only effective strategy is to win the bosses over to your point of view. Applying pressure to your team members will only make them hostile.

THE CARPETBAGGER

The original carpetbaggers were opportunist politicians from the north who hurried down to the defeated southern states after the American Civil War.

They presented themselves as caring individuals with a mission to protect and promote the interests of the newly-enfranchised former slaves. In reality they were out to get the maximum personal benefit from the situation and then disappear in a cloud of dust before the adverse consequences of their interference became apparent.

On the project team, you'll find them anxious to be involved in the high-profile activities and prominent at meetings attended by senior managers. They tend

not to be too keen to commit themselves to anything involving a sustained contribution or likely to cause conflict with their line.

There's no foolproof strategy for handling carpetbaggers (some do very well in big organisations) but you can protect yourself by getting them to sign-up to their promises and making sure that their bosses are aware of the project and its needs. That way when the carpetbagger moves on you stand some chance of getting a satisfactory replacement.

THE AL CAPONE

This is one to watch out for if you feel a sense of ownership or responsibility for the project. The Al Capone is a strong character who has a lot in common with the carpetbagger but with one essential difference — he intends to stick around. Before you know what's happened you find yourself asking his approval for any decisions you want to make. The other members of the team check with him, not you, about the work they're doing and eventually you find it's him who gets invited to the senior managers' meeting to brief the top brass about the project. He's taken over your territory.

This character is ruthless. Unless you are equally tough and powerful you would be well advised to pay-up the protection money by accepting him as de facto project

manager. If you decide to stand your ground you need a powerful ally very early in the project.

Ensure that your champion makes it clear to all concerned, especially Al's boss, that *you* are the project manager and the organisation wants Al to give you his cooperation.

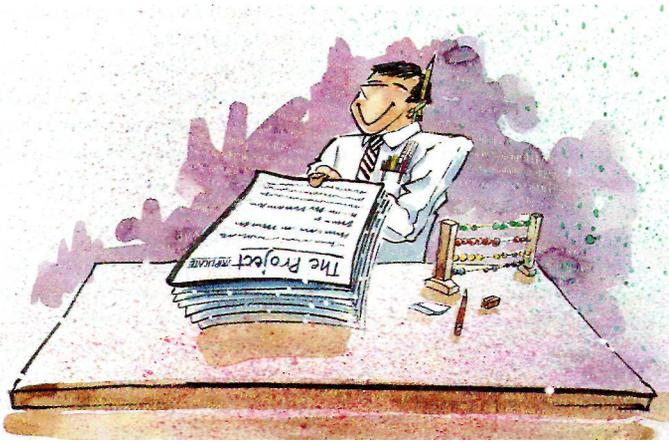
THE TECHNOCRAT

Every project needs its technocrats. Generally they are an amiable lot who don't cause the project manager too much trouble. The main risk attached to having them on your team is that they influence the project disproportionately towards their own technical specialism. Your aim as project manager is to harness the technocrat's input in order to produce the best deliverables consistent with time and cost constraints, ie, *optimum* quality.

The technocrat on the other hand will be orientated towards the production of *maximum* quality — "we can, therefore we must", or technological self-actualisation, to coin a phrase.

Make sure that the end-users get the chance to specify their needs at an early stage, then draw up tight deliverable specs., pointing the technocrat's undoubted abilities towards one of the other parameters, such as time or cost rather than technical brilliance.

continued overleaf



THE MANUAL-MINDER

This character is the guardian of the rule book. This person is in a powerful position because projects really do need to run with a certain amount of discipline and formality. The trouble is that they will interpret the rules pedantically, apply them inappropriately, and convert guidance into absolute law. You won't stop them from doing everything strictly by the book, but you must prevent them from laying down the law to the rest of the team, over-ruling you in the process.

The best strategy to adopt is to ask for input from the manual when occasion arises, thus recognising the fount of knowledge. However, ensure that the project functions under the first law of project documentation: "As much as necessary but as little as possible". While the Manual Minder may know what the book says, understanding may actually be shallow — rule-quoting is often the last refuge of the baffled.

The project administration rules are those you draw up for your specific project. Guidance from any source is welcome, but in the end every project is unique. It's your job as project manager to define the needs.

N.B. Make sure you know which rules really do have to be obeyed and *don't* break them.

THE DISEMPOWERED

This is one of the hardest characters to deal with because you can't help sympathising with his predicament. He suffers from responsibility without power — frustrating for him and deadly for the success of your project.

Typically, he's been sent to "represent" his department, but he can't make any decisions or commit himself or his unit to anything at all. The most he can do is to report back to his own boss the arguments and discussions that took place at the project meeting.

Your urgent task at the first project meeting is to identify him. No-one likes

other people to know that they have no power, so it's likely that he will talk as though he's the main man in his neck of the woods. You won't find out until later (maybe too late) that you have a disempowered team member to contend with.

A failure to empower people often stems from a lack of trust; in their ability or their integrity. You aren't in a position to solve the organisational or management problems of other parts of the organisation, but you might be able to sow the seeds of improvement by having a quiet word with your team member's boss. Point out that, as John Garnett of the Industrial Society used to say "with every pair of hands you get a free brain". You might do worse than to send along a complimentary copy of Nancy Foy's 4 excellent book "Empowering People At Work", which should convince anyone whose mind isn't completely slammed shut.

If all else fails, fall back on the concurrence strategy: Use the project meetings to decide what ought to be done and then fax the proposals direct to the manager with the power to commit resources, asking for concurrence.

THE TECHNOPHOBE

It's very likely that one team member will be very uneasy with technology that you regard as a perfectly normal, indeed essential, part of working life.

Where this person is concerned, keyboards come attached to pianos, spreadsheets belong on beds, pert is an adjective and a critical path is that dodgy bit under the canal bridge where someone got mugged last year.

You can forget getting your project plans updated directly into WhizzoProject, progress reports will be handwritten and the phone will ring unanswered — because transferring calls involves interacting with machinery at an advanced level.

Now there are several approaches to the

treatment of phobias. At one end of the spectrum there is the "flooding" technique. This involves exposing the sufferer to a massive overdose of the thing he or she fears most: a roomful of spiders for the arachnophobic, etc.. Readers should not attempt this approach with anyone on the project team unless you are both a) a fully-qualified psychiatrist of immense experience and b) willing to undergo plastic surgery, change your name and start a new life in Accrington.

The more subtle approach (which may not reach completion in the current financial year) is based on conditioning techniques. It involves gently introducing the victim to the source of his anxiety, in the least threatening circumstances you can devise, at the same time associating the experience with something pleasant or agreeable. After time the anxiety source becomes linked with positive associations and no longer produces the phobic reaction.

The latter is probably the general approach to go for in the project team. I've seen people who had no time for computers gradually change their opinion when rationally-based project plans, produced using "project management" software, convinced their bosses that the job really *ought* to take six months, not two and involve twenty-six people, not five. Eventually the breakthrough occurs and the technophobes are spotted early one morning actually entering data at the keyboard.

It doesn't work every time, and there is always the danger that the phobia will be displaced onto something much more serious, like a morbid fear of consultants, for example.

With a bit of luck, most of the people you find at your first project team meeting will be enthusiastic, genuine and able; and your project a great success. We all have our weaknesses, but most people have at least one strength. It's your job as project manager to integrate that strength into the team. As Belbin⁵ says: "Nobody's perfect, but a team can be".

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