

## Project Commitment: How to Get It and Keep It!

by Janet L. Chan, PMP

Turn the dream of gaining  
total project support and  
accountability into reality.



COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT from your executive sponsor, peer managers, and project team ... sounds good to me! Project managers in the trenches have long known that this support is key to the ultimate success of any project. However, like most things in life, knowing that something is desirable or beneficial and actually achieving it are two different things.

I once attended a baseball game during a trip to Toronto. The fellow seated behind me felt compelled to provide a running color commentary to me and everyone else seated nearby. When an opposing batter stepped up to the plate, he'd scream, "Strike him out!" When a fly ball was hit, he'd yell, "Catch that ball!" Despite this man's good intentions, little progress was made. Why? Because he was merely repeating objectives that everyone else in the stadium already had. We all knew what had to be done; we just didn't know how to do it. Similarly, project managers know they need to obtain the support of

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the executive sponsor, peer managers, and the project team—it's just a lot easier said than done.

Here are some proven strategies that can help you obtain and, just as importantly, maintain the commitment and support you need.

### **Executive Sponsor Support**

The importance of executive sponsor support cannot be overstated. The 1995 study of IT project management in the United States, conducted by the Standish Group of Dennis, Mass., reported a staggering rate of project failure. The report, appropriately entitled *Chaos*, found lack of executive support to be the leading cause of IT project failure. I recently had a project near-death experience, where I was saved by the support of an executive sponsor. I was managing a project to set up a project office and implement an accompanying project management methodology at a publicly funded agency. "Details" such as delivering projects on time or on budget are fairly new concepts to the education sector in general, although global competition and public funding cutbacks are making these "details" much more pertinent. My job was extremely difficult because I was attempting to implement structures and processes that were completely inconsistent with the prevailing organizational culture.

Here's a story that is scary but true: I recall a meeting with an agency director where I outlined the process for developing a detailed project budget. I explained how this would enable the organization to track actual against planned expenditures and derive cost variances during project implementation. The director interrupted me in mid-explanation, saying, "We don't do this here." I guess I had a stunned look on my face, because he sat me down, the novice, to explain the rules. He said that he deliberately did not track project expenditures because, if he did, someone might ask to see the information, and then he'd be obliged to share it. By burying the project expenditures in his departmental budget, he could never be held accountable for project budget overruns. If someone asked him if his projects were within budget, he could answer affirmatively, and no one could prove otherwise. "It's a perfect system," he crowed!

I was faced with an impossible task and probably would have gone down as another project failure statistic if not for the support of our new CEO. He actively supported the project inside the organization, gave me the office next to his, participated in the development of the project management methodology and training program, and greased the skids, so to speak. Eventually the staff accepted that this was the way things were going to be done, and they just did it! Here are some project death-defying strategies.

### **Executive Strategies That Work**

**Sell Your Project.** I want to stress that "sell" is not a four-letter word. If you want to obtain commitment and buy-in for your project, you have to be able to sell it. Makes a lot of sense if you think about it.

I'm not advocating that you don the plaid suit of yesterday's door-to-door salesperson. I'm merely suggesting that to obtain the required buy-in, you need to employ some of the tricks of the sales trade. The best sales people know that to be successful they must create a "need" for their products or services. Similarly, you create a need for your project by demonstrating how your project will benefit your executive sponsor, how his life will be easier after the project has been completed. It's the old WIFM ("what's in it for me") principle. Obviously, before you can employ WIFM successfully you need to research the situation. You need in-depth knowledge of the department's goals and objectives. You need to study the pressing issues and problems facing your executive sponsor. Most importantly, before you start selling your project, you need to objectively assess the project's viability.

How many of you wish to pour money and human resources into a project that is doomed to fail and will dog your reputation for the rest of your career? I'm guessing that, with the exception of a few gluttons for punishment, there will be no takers. I can assure you that the average executive sponsor thinks just like you do!

I believe many projects fail because they were inherently flawed and had little chance of success from the beginning. So, before you start selling, make sure you're not peddling defective goods. Ask yourself: Does the

organization have the skills and resources required for carrying out the project? What are the project risks, and will I be able to mitigate them? What are the consequences of failure? And so on.

Let's look at the word "objectively." In my opinion, a good project manager is slightly schizophrenic. A good project manager must be empathetic yet goal-oriented. A good project manager truly believes in the project yet must be able to *objectively* assess its viability in the current circumstances. A friend of mine recently investigated the feasibility of enhancing the electronic data interchange (EDI) capabilities in the provincial education sector. She really believed in the project. She saw EDI as an important way to streamline administrative processes, such as the transfer of transcripts, and as an opportunity to reduce administrative costs. However, after *objectively* assessing the situation, she realized that the majority of the institutions were either not ready technically or did not have the resources to commit to the project. As a result, although she was and still is a true believer, she realized that the project could not succeed under the current circumstances, and so she recommended that it be postponed.

**Communicate Your Project.** Communicate more! Communicate more! That's the current mantra being chanted by management books and magazines. I certainly agree that more communication is required—more *effective* communication, that is. There is already more data available than anyone can possibly absorb and productively use. If you think of the number of unread messages in your e-mail inbox, I'm sure you'll agree that ineffective communication is just more noise in an already deafening world. A communication is only effective when the message is received and understood as intended; what is effective for one person may not be effective for another. Some executive sponsors hate e-mail; others will read their e-mail before doing anything else. Some executive sponsors don't know which end of a network diagram is up; others don't want to see anything else. Make sure you know what it takes to get your message across.

A key objective of communicating to your executive sponsor is to ensure that any

project issues or problems are brought to the sponsor's attention as soon as possible. In other words, you need to "protect" your executive sponsor.

I recently attended a project management conference where there was a roundtable session with executives from Fortune 500 companies. The executives were there to speak about their views and experiences with project management and project managers. One fellow stood up, and he was mad! He said he was tired of project managers who asked for his support—in terms of money, human resources, and political support; in other words, he was constantly being asked to stick his neck out for projects. Unfortunately, many project managers then failed to inform him of problems or issues in time for him to react to them in an intelligent manner. In fact, he usually only heard about the problems after the project had turned into a disaster. What is the moral of the story? A good project manager communicates the good, the bad, and the ugly in a timely manner in order to protect the executive sponsor—which is really a self-preservation strategy. If you allow your current project sponsor to go down in flames, what are the chances that you will be able to obtain her support for your next project? The phrase "a snowball's chance in hell" certainly comes to mind.

Another communications strategy is to involve your sponsor. Studies have indicated that if people are involved in a process or project, they are much more likely to be committed to it—doesn't matter what it is.

Your communications need to be effective reminders to your executive sponsor. My three-year-old nephew is the cutest fellow, but he doesn't have a very long attention span. At Christmas time, I gave him a challenge. If he could sit quietly for three minutes, I would give him a great big, delicious candy cane. He was initially very keen, but after about 46 seconds he was distracted by something else and forgot all about the candy cane. Unfortunately, the average executive sponsor tends to have a similar attention span, but for good reason: They're busy people. They are saddled with enormous responsibilities. They have numerous issues with which to deal, and they are in-

involved with many different projects. Even if they are highly committed to your project, it's easy for them to be distracted. Therefore, it is critical that you communicate consistently and effectively to remind your executive sponsor about your project and the benefits that will be realized through it.

ager's performance plans and, in case of large or mission-critical projects, the project should be specifically identified. This ensures that your request to the functional manager for project resources is no longer a favor but an objective, similar to any other department objective.

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### **Peer Manager Support**

No one doubts the criticality of obtaining executive sponsor support—it has certainly been said enough times. What often goes unsaid is the criticality of obtaining peer manager support. Your peer managers fall into two categories: functional managers and peer project managers. Let's look at the functional manager first. Most organizations are structured into a "matrix"; the resources report along departmental lines to their functional managers. Project managers must "borrow" resources from various departments as required. As a result, the functional manager is the primary person to ensure that you have the right resources with the right skills at the right time—clearly, a VIP.

### **Functional Manager Strategies That Work**

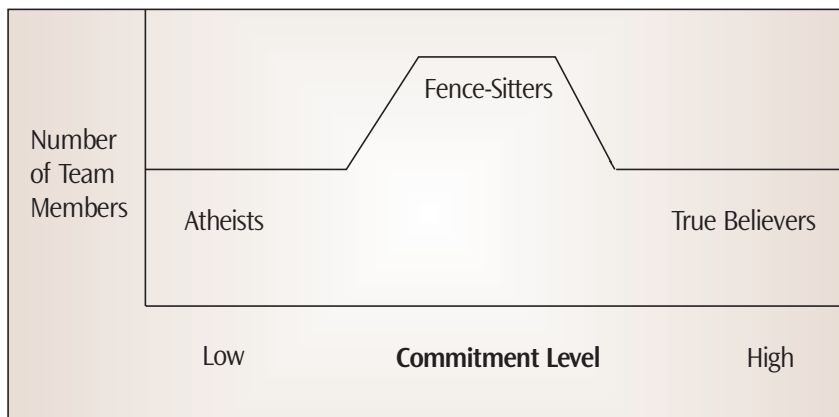
**Make It an Objective.** The basic job of a functional manager is to meet the department's goals and objectives. The marketing department probably has a sales target; the production department, a production quota. Providing you with project resources in a timely manner is probably not on the list. If you want functional manager support for your project, the provision of project resources must become a functional manager objective; more correctly, you need to convince management to make it a functional manager objective. Management needs to understand that a successful project needs adequate resourcing and that the functional manager has a responsibility, in conjunction with the project manager, for making this happen. This responsibility should be articulated in the functional man-

**Make It Easy.** The average functional manager has a number of goals and objectives unrelated to your project and must manage limited resources in the most effective manner possible toward meeting all of these objectives. You have made the task more challenging by adding the provision of project resources to the list of objectives. Make a difficult job easier by presenting the functional manager with a clear statement of the skill set required and the resource's role and responsibility on the project team. Most importantly, ensure that you accurately estimate when and for how long you will need the resource. A functional manager must plan the workload of all the resources in the department, and nothing is more frustrating than having to modify work plans because of poor estimates. Finally, make sure you "share the glory" and recognize the contribution your functional manager made to the success of your project. Recognizing the functional manager's contribution today lays the groundwork for obtaining that person's support tomorrow. Implementation of enterprise resource planning (ERP) software can make life easier by providing industrial-strength tools to integrate the management of department and project resources. However, ERP utopia can't be built in a day and won't be built for peanuts.

### **Peer Project Manager Strategies That Work**

Peer project managers—the other project managers in the organization—may be working on projects that are directly related to your project. Peer project managers are typically seen as competition, and in some respects they are. Your peer project manager

## Team Member Commitment Levels



**Exhibit 1.** At the beginning of a project, the team member commitment level varies, but the majority of people are usually sitting on the fence.

may be vying for the attention of your executive sponsor and may be asking for the human resources you need. But, here's another perspective: These people can be allies rather than rivals.

**Don't Compete; Collaborate.** Jim Carlton's excellent book, *Apple: The Inside Story of Intrigue, Egomania and Business Blunders*, chronicles how the Apple Corporation went from being the darling of Silicon Valley to the brink of bankruptcy. There were lots of reasons, but one was the poor relationship between peer project managers. At one point, Apple had seven different engineering teams working on graphics projects. They were all working on similar products, but they never combined their efforts, never talked about problems encountered or solutions unearthed. Each team worked as if it were an independent company instead of a part of the same organization, with a common goal. By collaborating, they might have achieved a single "insanely great" product instead of seven mediocre ones. The natural instinct is to compete with one's competitors; it takes vision to look for ways to collaborate with them.

**Be Supportive and Helpful.** Being a project manager is a tough and lonely job. Project managers often end up between a rock and an impossible scope change request, and even the most hardened project manager occasionally needs a sympathetic ear. But it's probably not the best policy to unburden yourself to the project team, since members are looking to you for leadership. I

would also advise against constantly running to your executive sponsor or customer, because they may start wondering why they are paying you. Peer project managers can form an invaluable support and assistance network; use them as sounding boards and as sources of information. Certainly no one will understand your lament about "user requirements as firm as quicksand" or be able to offer potential solutions as well as a peer project manager. Beyond supporting your peer project manager, be willing to provide assistance if possible. We live in an imperfect world—this is why we invented the "delete" key. Mistakes will be made, and your peer project manager may need your assistance to get a project back on track. Providing support and assistance builds your peer project manager network and positions the organization's project managers as a "team" that can focus on organization-wide as well as specific project goals.

Unfortunately, the idea of collaborating with your peer project managers is mostly foreign. My suggestion is to start providing support and assistance in your organization even if no one else does—it may be the start of a cultural change. Like you, your peer project managers already have enough problems to tackle; they would probably welcome the opportunity to see you as an ally rather than a rival.

### Team Support

Team support is critical to the success of a project; after all, the team members are the

ones who will do the work. If you are able to obtain the support of a strong executive sponsor and functional manager, you can expect a certain level of cooperation and compliance from your team members. Note, however, that compliance and commitment are not the same thing. A friend of mine is an avid amateur rower. She gets up at 4:30 a.m. three times a week so that she can train for a few hours before work. To me, this is the difference between compliance and commitment. As project managers, you need more than the bodies of your team members; you need them body, mind, and soul. Exhibit 1 illustrates where commitment levels on a project usually lie.

A typical project team can be segmented based on its members' levels of commitment to the project. The first group comprises the "true believers." They have a high level of commitment and they really believe in the project. The second group is composed of the "fence sitters." Their level of commitment is lukewarm and they probably haven't made up their minds about the project. The project "atheists" make up the third group. They have a low or nonexistent level of commitment to the project. In fact, they may be covertly or even overtly working to undermine the project. A natural instinct may be to focus one's efforts on converting the project atheists—they're probably yelling the loudest. I think this is a mistake. Assuming a symmetrical commitment-level distribution, the majority of the team members will be warming the fence. You are probably better off focusing your efforts where the payoff is the greatest. Don't forget about the atheists—you want your detractors where you can see them—but don't spend an inordinate amount of time trying to win them over. If you do, you will probably lose the opportunity to convert the fence sitters, and your project true believers may start looking for a new religion.

### Team Strategies That Work

**Provide Growth Opportunities.** Peter Drucker, in his book *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, suggests that "knowledge" workers need to be managed as if they were volunteers. Volunteers get more satisfaction from their work than paid employees because they aren't receiving a paycheck for their efforts. Unlike volunteers, knowl-

edge workers must be paid. However, money alone cannot motivate knowledge workers to perform. This is especially important to note since project managers seldom directly control team member compensation levels. Drucker suggests that volunteers and knowledge workers are motivated, above all, by a need for challenge. It's easy to assign a C++ programmer to program a C++ module. The challenge is seeing the systems design potential in the programmer and assigning tasks that utilize existing programming skills while providing opportunities to develop this potential. Providing those opportunities takes more effort than merely plugging a resource into a familiar role, but the payoff will be an interested, involved, and highly committed team member.

**Provide "Spiritual" Direction.** The relationship between the project manager and the team is similar to the relationship between a conductor and the orchestra. Musicians probably know much more about playing their specific instruments than the conductor does. The violinist does not need, and the conductor probably cannot provide, detailed instructions for playing the violin.

However, the violinist does need guidance for playing with the rest of the orchestra and needs the conductor to provide the "big picture" perspective. I call this high-level guidance *spiritual direction*, because it occurs at a higher level than mere instructions on how to perform a task. Project managers provide two levels of spiritual direction to their team members. First, they coordinate the overall work of the entire team by arranging task assignments and schedules. Second, they provide a sense of purpose and direction for each individual team member and for the team as a whole. Team members need to know how their individual contributions fit with the rest of the project work and to feel that their contributions are critical to the success of the project. They also must know how the project fits with other organizational initiatives and understand how the project contributes to the overall success of the organization. Only a project manager who truly *believes* in the project can provide spiritual direction. If the project manager doesn't believe in the project, it isn't likely that anyone else on the team will either—the team can spot a phony a mile away.

**Be Confident.** From the time we were youngsters and faithfully followed the Scout leader into the wilderness, we have expected our leaders to know where they were going. Your project team expects the same when you lead them. The level of project team commitment is largely dependent on their level of confidence in you and the project. The team needs to feel confident that the project will achieve tangible results and be perceived as a success. Remember: Your team doesn't want to be involved with a doomed project anymore than your executive sponsor does. A confident leader is especially important if the project runs into problems. During times of crisis the team will take its cue from the project manager. A confident project manager with a clear sense of direction will be able to maintain, even build, team commitment during turbulent times.

OBTAINING THE COMMITMENT and support of your executive sponsor, peer managers, and project team members is critical to the success of every project. Putting these ideas to work can help you obtain and maintain the needed commitment. ■

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