

## Winning client commitment

When you are about to embark on a project, it is vital to know that you have the commitment of every level of the organisation, and this can be a major challenge. You have to find out how your client has handled the internal decision-making process, and then try to fill in the gaps, which can be difficult after the decision has been made.

Here are some classic examples:

Rachel is an HR administrator – she fears the new system that you are about to implement. She has not been consulted about it, and worries that her job will become redundant because of it. She has decided on her strategy, which she thinks is quite clever. She will give every appearance of supporting the change, but will give as little information as possible, and hope that her omissions will result in at worst delays, and at best, a system that does not work well, and will need manual support – from Rachel.

Mark is an accountant. He was quite happy with the old finance system, and from what he knows of the new one, cannot see any benefits. The Finance Director did have a meeting to discuss the change, but it was clear that the decision was made, and now they are busy at the clerical level, analysing requirements. If they bother to talk to him, he will tell them exactly what he needs, but he's prepared to bet they won't, and he's certainly not going to offer. He will make sure he takes every opportunity to find fault, and let people know how badly it's going. He is very well connected to the grapevine, and knows how to use it.

Ray is the Production Director. He has just been told at a UK board meeting that they are going to replace the finance system. This is a European decision, so the Finance Director says, but Ray has his doubts. He thinks the FD is just using this as an excuse not to involve people in the decision. This is going to have endless implications for the production staff, just at a time when they are making a major change to production methods. "The timing is appalling," he complains the Board, but the FD gives the impression that the decision is out of their hands.

Ray tells his staff what is happening, and instructs them that production needs come first at all times. "So if they want to take up your time on this project, make them wait, and if they get difficult, refer them to me."

These examples illustrate how easily people become disaffected when a decision is made without consulting or involving them. They may then actively seek to sabotage or undermine the project, or simply give it a bad press.

It would be nice to think that this is the client's problem, but unfortunately, if these people are successful, and things do go wrong, guess who gets the blame? It is therefore in your interest to win these people over, and if you can't, to flag early to your sponsor at the highest level, that they are a problem, and what the consequences of their actions are likely to be.

Of our three examples, Mark will be the easiest to deal with. He is prepared to be straight with you, if you bother to ask him. His main concern is status and involvement. The fact that he was not included in the decision making process he sees as an insult to his position. So your plan here will be to pay him lots of attention, listen to his concerns, and hope to win him over.

If he remains unconvinced, try to arrange a meeting with him and the Finance Director, so that they can sort things out face to face. At the end of that, either all will be well, or Mark will pretend it is, or the FD will know he has a problem. You need to check on Mark afterwards, to be sure what he really thinks, and if he's pretending, you may need to go round the loop again, or talk to the FD.

Rachel will be harder to deal with, because she appears cooperative. It may be that the technical questions you ask will tell you she is holding something back, but an important factor will be the reassurance you can give her about her future role with the new system. Her main issue is security, and when that is addressed, and she knows she has a future with the company, then she will have a real interest in making the new system a success.

The issue with Ray is more complex, both from the motive point of view, and the fact that an entire department is involved. He is obviously not good friends with the Finance Director, and might just oppose anything he does, no matter how much he is involved in the decision, or how good the benefits are.

It's key to find out what really matters to Ray, and whether the system can be of real benefit to him. If it can, and he is not being obstructive for the sake of it, then he only needs to see the benefits. If this is a battleground between Ray and the FD, then you need to escalate this to your highest contact level in the account, and tell Ray beforehand that he is forcing you to do it. The threat may work, but if it is a real battle, then Ray will probably be happy to fight it in public, as he made his opposition clear to the Board at the outset. This is far from ideal, but the client knows about it and knows that they need to deal with it.

In any project, the hardest people to deal with are the ones you don't know about! Once you have identified Rachel, Mark and Ray you can address their issues, but if there are others like them, sitting undiscovered and working against the project, that is a much bigger problem.

The best way to overcome this is to go through the following checklist with your client at the beginning of the project:

1. What was the decision making process?
2. Who was involved in it?
3. Who made the final decision?
4. Did anyone oppose it, and why?
5. How was it communicated?
6. Who will be affected by the project – directly and indirectly?
7. What is the general feeling about the project at the different levels of the organisation?

From this information, look particularly for a mismatch between 2 and 6 – who was involved and who is affected – that will be a good place to start.

As always, just delivering on your project plan is not enough. You need client commitment at all levels to achieve real success, and to be seen to achieve it.