

Case Study 5 – The wrong way to appoint a project manager

Ron Shaw had been appointed project manager a couple of hours ago. It was the first time that he had some time to think about his appointment. The voice of his manager Dennis Pay, still rang in his ears. “I want it done by yesterday. I do not want to spend any money. I want the best product on the market”. His initial thought was that Dennis had been a little unreasonable. For starters, it was safe to assume that it was impossible to finish the project by ... yesterday. What really worried him though was the fact that he did not have a clear idea of what the project was all about. Dennis was one of those managers, who adopted the Nike slogan, “Just do it” and always looked at problems through rose-colored glasses, an optimist by nature. Dennis equated realism with pessimism. Ron knew that Dennis’ knowledge of computers ended with Dennis being able to switch on his PC, on a clear day. Dennis was a wheeler and dealer and had missed his calling for a career in politics. He understood that Dennis was unaware of the nuances of the project, to put it mildly.

One of the major problems that Ron faced was the fact that the project mandate was unclear at best and that Dennis in three short sentences had defined all of the project parameters, time, cost, scope and quality. Even the most experienced project manager would not be able to do this, even after detailed study of the project. The only reasonable explanation is that Dennis was very knowledgeable about the subject and knew exactly what he was demanding from Ron. Ron knew that this was not the case. It did not take long for Ron to reach the conclusion that acceptance of Dennis’ mandate, would be equal to agreeing to become an accomplice to a crime.

Ron was sure that the project, in its current form, would turn out to be a disaster and basically he was asking himself whether he wanted to be part of this crime which was about to happen. He decided to put pen to paper and confront Dennis’ wish with some logical questions.

- What are the deliverables?
- What is the budget for the project?

- What are the responsibilities of the project manager?
- What is the authority of the project manager?
- Who will form the project team?
- Who will be project manager?

The list was becoming bigger and bigger and it became apparent that Dennis would lose face, if the list was circulated. Dennis would not be very happy with Ron. Ron remembered that his daughter needed braces for her teeth, his wife was expecting a surprise gift for their wedding anniversary and that the car was in the shop. At the risk of getting on the bad side of Dennis, Ron reluctantly tore up the list and threw it in the bin.

The combination of the authoritarian management style of Dennis, coupled with Ron's attempt to safeguard his job at any cost, have set the cornerstone for a disastrous project.

Discussion points

1. The specific project is not important.
2. How can a project manager such as Ron Shaw, deal with an overbearing manager such as Dennis Pay?
3. What would you do in the place of project manager Ron Shaw?
4. If the organization had developed project management procedures, would it be more difficult for manager Dennis Pay to behave in this manner?
5. What parts of the project management environment would prevent manager Dennis Pay from behaving in such an arbitrary manner?
6. If there was a program manager who had overall responsibility of the project, would manager Dennis Pay have such a free hand in behaving in this manner?