

This chapter is taken from *Business Driven Information Technology: Answers to 100 Critical Questions for Every Manager* by David Laube (ed.) and Ray Zammuto (ed.). It was sponsored by The College of Business at the University of Colorado, Denver. Published September 2003 by Stanford Press.

Each chapter in the book is a response to a question. This chapter answers the question, “**Why is it important to explicitly state the intended business result of an IT project? How should this be done?**” Please note – what is expressed in this chapter is true not only of IT projects, but also of strategic initiatives.

Question 97: What are the keys to getting cross-functional work done?

William W. Casey

Adhocracy is the name some management gurus have given to organizations that tackle goals and problems with temporary, fluid structures staffed with a cross-functional team of experts.¹ Tom Peters considers it quite the wave of the future.² Most IT organizations, on the other hand, just consider it a way of life, and have no fancy terms for it. Few major IT undertakings can be done in any way other than the *ad hoc* gathering of various business and technical expertise onto the same, temporary, fluid structure: a project team.

However, such cross-functional efforts can give managers and employees an unsettled feeling. Situations where an employee has more than one manager (i.e., cross-functional) can result in a number of difficulties such as:

- *Team members receive conflicting directions from their multiple managers.* If it is not clear which manager is in charge of what (without overlapping accountability) then it is left to the team member to decide which manager to take seriously.
- *Team members have unrealistic demands put on their time.* When two managers each want 80% of a team member's time, it's up to the team member to either burn out or, again, decide which manager to take seriously.
- *Managers (usually, project managers) cannot get their work done.* When the

project manager assigns work to a “dotted-line” team member, that work competes with assignments from the real manager, the one who performs the team member’s performance appraisals.

Three Rules of Cross-Functional Management

Such problems are the norm in many organizations. However, I have interviewed managers in many other cross-functional organizations that perform their resource-sharing feats without a hitch. These successful cross-functional organizations are mostly professional service firms such as law, engineering, and management consultation, but also include the occasional IT shop. The three commonalities among these successful organizations are sufficiently consistent that they might rightly be called rules.

1. *No two managers can make the same assignment to the same team member.*

For example, a math teacher does not tell a student how to hold a clarinet and a music teacher does not tell the student how do factorials. Disaster results when a parent and a coach yell instructions to a young soccer player at the same time. Placing two project managers at the helm of the same project, or allowing both the employee’s project manager and functional manager to make project assignments will result in a similar disaster.

2. *Each manager must control meaningful performance consequences.* That is what happens when each teacher hands out grades for his or her class. It is interesting to consider what would happen to students’ study habits if only one of several teachers handed out grades. That situation would be akin to the results obtained by managers with dotted-line employees. Those

managers often wish that they, too, could meaningfully grade the work of their indirect reports, and that it would be treated as more than polite “input.”

3. *Resolving work overloads (and underloads) is the accountability of the managers, not the employee.* The employee’s accountability is to notify the managers of the problem and assist in its resolution. Without this rule, the resource being allocated (the employee) is, *de facto*, put in charge of resource allocation—not a good idea.

These rules represent no departure from the requisite authorities cited earlier (Q96); they serve only as an additional stipulation when employees are accountable to more than one manager.

The Resource Pool

Some IT departments lean heavily on the resource pool approach to structure; projects draw from resource pools of experts. The resource pools can serve as “homerooms” for specialized knowledge workers such as programmers, database experts, project managers, technical writers—whatever kind of expertise that benefits from oversight by a manager proficient in that area of knowledge.

Many successful resource pools lean heavily on the first rule cited. The resource pool manager holds employees accountable for the proper exercise of their expertise, while the project manager holds them accountable for agreed-upon outputs. Put more simply, one manager holds employees accountable for the *how*; the other manager holds them accountable for the *what*. In this arrangement, project managers do not have to be experts in every facet of the project. Further, employees get the benefit of ongoing professional development—a keen advantage in retaining technical talent.

The Customer-Supplier Arrangement

Not every contributor on a project team is sufficiently central to the project that the project manager needs to manage that person, with all the authorities implied by the word *manage* (Q96). A workable alternative, then, is the *customer-supplier relationship*. In this arrangement, the project manager (the customer) explicitly arranges with the employee and that person's manager (the supplier) the nature of the employee's contribution to the project.

The probability of success increases with adherence to several common sense guidelines outlined below:

- *Spell out the agreement in writing and have it signed by all parties concerned.*

This proviso is accepted in some cultures and quite revolutionary in others.

As an acceptable compromise to actually signing the agreement, the project manager can treat the written agreement as "meeting minutes" to be emailed to all participants after the meeting.

- *Agree to specific supplier outputs, not just time spent.* When the customer specifies the need for, say, a database analyst half time for 12 weeks, it is not nearly as effective as also specifying the outputs required in that interval.
- *Agree to what is needed of the customer by the supplier.* Usually, the supplier can succeed only with customer support. By specifying the nature of that support in the agreement, success becomes much more likely.
- *Agree to a remedy process, should one party deem the other to have fallen short of the agreement.* This is the customer-supplier equivalent of a pre-nuptial agreement. It makes conflict less likely to occur, and less rocky if it

does occur.

- *The person doing the work and that person's manager need to be involved in the discussions with the customer.* Agreements with only the worker risk excluding the resource allocator (the worker's manager) from an important resource allocation agreement. Therefore, the agreement might not receive much support.

Summary

IT project teams frequently comprise members of different organizations, each person accountable to multiple managers, including the project manager. The potential confusion arising from such cross-functional arrangements can be mitigated with these rules, which are extensions of the stipulations cited in another answer (Q96):

1. No two managers can make the same assignment to the same team member.
2. Each manager must control meaningful performance consequences.
3. Resolving work overloads (and underloads) is the responsibility of the managers, not the employee—with the employee's assistance.

When the project manager requires less control than that afforded by these guidelines, then a customer-supplier agreement will help ensure that team members receive clear directives and treat project deliverables as priorities.

Resources

Web Based Resources

Business 2.0: Web Guide—Management Style.

<<http://www.business2.com/webguide/0,1660,4570,00.html>>.

Articles

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Books

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Verma, V.K. Organizing Projects for Success: The Human Aspects of Project Management. Newton Square: Project Management Institute, 1995, Chapter 6.

Waterman, Robert H. Adhocracy: The Power to Change. New York: Norton, 1993.

¹ James Brian Quinn, Henry Mintzberg and Robert M. James, The Strategy Process: Concepts, Contexts and Cases (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988).

Robert H. Waterman, Adhocracy: The Power to Change (New York: Norton, 1993).

² Tom Peters, Introduction, Adhocracy: The Power to Change, by Robert H. Waterman (New York: Norton, 1993).