



Problem Solver – People Management

Problem

A member of your team is under stress, time-poor and struggling to meet deadlines. How would you mentor him or her through these difficulties?

Solution

The first mistake would be to assume that this is all about the individual. Not only could the time pressures be due to external influences such as family issues and commitments but it may also be about how your organisation operates. This is particularly the case in matrixed organisations where an individual is part of one or more project teams as well as providing maintenance and support services. In addition, the systems your organisation uses may also be hampering performance thus adding to the time pressures facing a team member.

The second mistake is to assume the team member is apathetic. That fact that they are stressed indicates not only that they are aware of their commitments but that they are also trying to meet them all.

The third mistake would be to assume that just mentoring them through the difficulties will be sufficient. In the end something needs to change or something will change. If you do not arrange for something to change, then change will occur anyway. Either the team member's productivity will fall due to the stress, they will be repeatedly sick due to stress related/induced illness or ultimately the team member will leave the team to take up a less stressful activity. The challenge for you is to facilitate a change that has the least impact on your project.

Enough about what not to do and more about the solution.

The first step, before any conversation with the team member, is for you to gather information on the obvious stressors on the team member. This can be achieved through subtle observation over a couple of days and/or a review of your organisations resource management system to identify the

number, range and importance of the tasks assigned to the team member by the various other projects/teams in your organisation.

WARNING: Do NOT involve anyone else in this exercise as it will invariably get back to the team member concerned and they will be out the door before you have had a chance to meet with them.

The second step is to choreograph an impromptu meeting with the team member. This could be achieved, for example, by asking the team member to stay behind at the conclusion of a regular project team meeting.

Now its vitally important that as you introduce the topic of your discussion you quickly get from "I have noticed that" to "...is there anything I can do?"

Speed is of the essence as you do not want the team member to get the impression that this discussion is about their performance. Rather it is a discussion about the factors that are placing stresses on them and interfering with their performance. Your discussion needs to be firmly focussed on the stressors and not on the team member's resultant performance. In fact, do not mention their performance at all.

Of equal importance is the opening phrase "I have noticed..." even if it was originally brought to your attention by another team member. Firstly because it conveys to the team member that their stress levels are not generally known and they do not become embarrassed. Secondly, if the team member is in denial about their problems or is sensitively defensive, they can deny your observation without loss of face.

NOTE: If the team member denies your observation then I would conclude the meeting there and then with words like. "I'm sorry I misinterpreted the situation. However, if things do change, by all means come to me and we can work out an appropriate solution"



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The third step is to actively listen to the team member as they unload their issues, concerns and frustrations. Take notes if you have to so that you can step through them later but do not show or refer to any notes you may have made in the first step as this may give the impression to the team member that this meeting is a pre-planned ambush.

As the team member unloads, do not try to suggest solutions to the issues as they are identified. This session is like any brainstorming session, get the issues down first before attempting to suggest solutions. Again, if you propose solutions during the unload step it may give the impression that you have pre-defined the outcome and the meeting is a pre-planned ambush.

Be aware that as the team member unloads they may identify you, or some of the things you do or require to be done as some of the issues that are causing them stress. DO NOT become defensive or argumentative during the unload step. Note the issues and indicate that the two of you will work through those issues along with the other issues.

The fourth step is to discuss and reach agreement on what issues can be addressed, how and by whom.

Now the solutions do not necessarily need to be elaborate. Sometimes just giving the team member the opportunity to unload is sufficient so as you move through the issues the team member may later dismiss a point they raised during the unload step. At other times, a joint acknowledgement that the issue is short lived and there is a light at the end of the tunnel is also sufficient. For valued team members you might offer a non-monetary sweetener to the end of the tunnel (eg. days in lieu) to encourage them to put up with it for just a little longer. More interventionist solutions might include:

- ☞ re-assigning tasks within your team to share the work load;
- ☞ re-locating your team member away from any distractions or noisy work areas
- ☞ you approaching other project/team leaders to reduce their call on your team member's time; or
- ☞ you approaching business process/systems owners to identify options for streamlining those processes/systems and make them less onerous/time consuming.

The fifth step is to implement the outcomes reached with the team member. It is CRITICAL that you follow-through on the undertakings you made and to inform the team member of the progress or outcomes. Failure to follow-through will make the situation far worse than it was originally.

In any of your discussions within the team, other project/team leaders and business/systems owners that you do not identify your staff member's stress as the reason why you are seeking.

When you talk with your whole team you might say "The <> task that <> is doing now appears much larger/complex than originally anticipated, therefore I have decided that..."

When you talk with other project/team leads you might say "You have <> working on <>, but I really need <> to do <> which is important to my project because <>. Is there any chance I you can release <> or an additional <>?"

When you talk with business/systems owners you might say "Some of my team members have identified that <> is difficult/time consuming to use/follow. Have you given any thought to <>?"

Finally, continue to monitor the situation. Not only for the team member concerned but of the situation for other team members.