Program Management – Issue Avoidance

Program Management is not easy, and we commonly face issues managing people. This is especially difficult when we are working remotely, across time zones and cultures, and in a complex Startup environment.

Sometimes in meetings, a Program Manager is faced with someone in a long monologue about all the things they are working on, problems they are facing, ancillary information, and side topics of interest and discussion. Often with an underlying message that “you,” as the Program Manager, don’t need to worry about all the details, “it will be sorted out.”” On the surface, this sounds great, and if the work is getting done, then this can be OK. But it can become a real problem when your Program is not completing tasks against your plan.

We took on a new sales staff member Simon with a lifetime of experience in sales. This person was new to the industry, but his resume was extensive. A few months in, we had not made any sales, so I joined a few remote video meetings run by the sales manager – Charles. What I noticed was that the new salesman would “take the floor” for up to 10 mins talking about this and that, things he’d researched, his opinions on the product, the observations he had made, his strategy for the product, his views about the people, customers, and leads. This would run from topic to topic with no opportunity for Charles to intervene. Of note, there was very little on how he was generating leads, and his quota of 10 new leads a day was becoming too much to be expected of him. As leads are an indicator of sales success and no sales have so far been made, this was a critical issue that needed to be addressed.

It can be challenging to determine the root cause fully, especially in a remote setting. As a Program Manager, you must know the details and find out. But a few of the reasons can be:

That Simon is very passionate about the topic and wants to share as much information as possible. We are also talking fills a basic human need. We all need to be heard and feel like our opinions matter.

Simon may be using long monologues to avoid accountability. If he can keep talking, he can bluster through multiple issues without anyone else engaging with any particular case, and he can always say something like, “Hey, I mentioned it in the meeting,” and protect himself and make Charles and others equally accountable.

In our case with Simon, it was a bit of both. Wanting to show as much progress as possible but not wanting to be accountable, not want to be measured, and to protect himself.

You might think, “Well, what if someone monologues for a bit.” It is pretty destructive not only, as mentioned above but also in that it can create and support a negative narrative, demotivate others and create a culture of avoidance and poor accountability.

An opposing narrative is an internal voice that people can adopt to excuse themselves. It can sound a bit like this “The company is not providing me with the things we need to succeed, they need to do more, the product won’t sell here in the USA as it is different to Europe, it’s not my fault if it doesn’t sell, they’ve set things up this way not me…” and so on. You cannot directly hear the negative narrative, but if you listen to the underlying message implied behind the words, you can. As you can imagine, this is not an ideal way to think about the company and its teammates, and this narrative can be passed along to others.

Also, if others in the team see that by offering a monologue, they can just skim over things, they may adopt the same behavior themselves, and the whole team has no sense of accountability.

You can do a few things to keep people like Simon from embarking on a monologue and the best time to act is right away. The underlying principle is “go easy on the person but hard on the issue.” Often the “hard on the issue” part is missed by managers as they always want to appear friendly and cheerful, but this is poor leadership. Key techniques are:

When you first encounter a monologue, it will likely take you by surprise, and you won’t necessarily recognize it until minutes later. Try to gently steer the conversation back to the most critical topics or issues you see. The measurables you hold them and yourselves accountable to; for Simon, you might say, “How many leads did you generate again?”. I often have my pen over my notepad to signal that I’m waiting for the number so I can write it down. Now you can take control of the conversation and ask more questions.

Another great technique is to give critical issues a name. For example, “the lead generation issue” clarifies what we are all talking about and holds the conversation to the core intent. In this case, there is an issue with lead generation, which signals to everyone that you see it seriously as you’ve named it and called it an issue. This can further legitimize your act, as all good Program Managers will take action to resolve issues.

Never feel you cannot interrupt the monologue when you are the lead or meeting chairman or organizer. You have meetings to drive decisions and actions, not for a chat. In the remote situation, I sometimes raise my hand, and if that doesn’t work, I say their name, “Simon, can I just go back to that lead generation issue to clarify something.” Again, you can take back control of the meeting; this a powerful technique as it stamps your authority in the meeting and shows the team you care about all key issues, even if you must interrupt.

Another way to handle things might be to have a side discussion or a separate meeting. A one-on-one meeting works well as you can engage with them without the politics of multiple people being involved.

Finally, you can make things easy for yourself if you set up the guidelines under which you intend to operate the meeting. We use many tools, including a project timeline, risk analysis, a project charter, etc. This way, everyone knows what, why, and how the project is. Also, a ticketing system like Trello or Jira will clarify what people need to do and when. An overarching approach like Agile helps everyone understand and fit in with the project and organization. And a leadership framework such as 4 phase (or four quadrants) leadership can help everyone communicate effectively.

In Simon's case, we found that if we interrupted the monologues early on and dug into the issue, we could get the problems addressed. We call this "bottoming out the issue." It's a technique that ensures that we all understand the details of the issue before we assume anything. It is a way of getting to the data without filtering it through each person's bias – or lens. It refers to a curve or J-curve that goes down before it reappears. In Simon's case, we set up a separate meeting where Charles had a one-on-one, and they both looked at how each lead was being done to find if there were more accessible or faster ways. We found that by using LinkedIn rather than Google, then leveraging 2nd and 3rd-level people in our collective network, and using InMail rather than the company website; we were able to speed up the lead generation by finding ten new leads each day easily achieved.

Many challenges are faced in managing people as a Program Manager; one is on top of issues. Issues can often be missed if team members skim over them without the management ensuring each one is fully addressed. Being proactive and taking control of a conversation is vital in meetings where you are driving the Program, and this has become even more important today with so much work being done remotely.

(*) The numbers & names in this Case Study are illustrative only and not intended to be accurate.

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