

*Max Messmer, Editor*

# Building Support for Difficult Projects

Few people look forward to working on projects that are long in duration, mundane in nature, or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, overwhelmingly complex. The reality, of course, is that your projects vary, and you won't always relish each one.

If you find yourself managing a project team charged with a difficult task, you need to build your own enthusiasm for what's ahead. It may help to recognize that successfully overseeing these types of assignments provides an excellent opportunity to increase your visibility within the organization and put your leadership talents to the test. After all, you will have excelled at a task no one else wanted. Building staff support for less desirable initiatives requires a communication strategy, vision, persistence, and patience. Here are some specific strategies for motivating your team.

## Be open and honest

As soon as you know the project is coming up, inform accounting staff who will be involved, even if you only have preliminary details. If you surprise people at the last minute

with the news that they'll be working on a difficult project, you're more likely to meet resistance.

It is beneficial to highlight the positives of a particular initiative, such as the fact that employees may build new skills or take part in work critical to the firm's success in the

process. Just be careful not to go overboard. Also point out the potential hurdles, challenges, or drawbacks to certain aspects of the project so people can set realistic expectations. You're more likely to foster respect and rapport with employees quickly if you are honest about the situation from the outset than if you try to make an assignment sound simpler or more interesting than it really is.

People want to be a part of projects that have a clear direction. Establish a timeline early on so employees know what to expect and when. For instance, accounting staff may need to research and build their



understanding of foreign tax laws under a tight deadline to assess a potential acquisition target abroad, which may require long work hours during certain weeks. Giving people as much information as possible will allow them to budget their time and prepare for what's ahead.

### **Put it in perspective**

As with all projects, it's essential that employees know the value of their work. What impact will the initiative have on the company? Why should they give their all to the assignment? Accounting staff who were involved in initial Sarbanes-Oxley Act compliance, for example, may have felt the satisfaction of completing that first internal control report. In fact, they may have even received special recognition for their efforts. Now that they're being asked to support the process of ongoing compliance, the rewards may be less immediate because they're working on longer-term tasks. In situations such as this, employees need to know that senior management still values their contributions, even though the results may not be realized immediately or marked by specific milestones.

### **Work as a team**

Employees will feel more invested in the outcome of a project if they are active participants and have a role in decision making. When the group is faced with a challenge or turning point, schedule a brainstorming session to solicit ideas and input. For instance, if a financial systems upgrade has been plagued with delays and problems, be up-front about common frustrations and ask staff for potential solutions.

When an initiative is challenging,

it is particularly important to make time for team-building activities. People who know each other well are more likely to have better working relationships and fewer conflicts when the pressure is on. Scheduling an off-site lunch to celebrate a project achievement can help to build camaraderie. Social activities can also be used to break up the monotony of repetitive tasks or to provide a respite during long work hours.

Finally, recognize when it's time to make personnel changes within your project team. If certain employees fail to support an initiative despite your best efforts, replace them on the team. Cynicism is contagious. Their negative attitudes may begin to affect the rest of the group and its ability to complete the assignment successfully.

Building employee enthusiasm and sustaining it during difficult projects is no easy task, but there are still ways to achieve the desired outcome with these initiatives. Communicate openly, share the value of everyone's work, and strive to develop a positive team environment. Few challenges are insurmountable, especially when approached with a positive attitude. ■

*Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are *Motivating Employees For Dummies®* and *Managing Your Career For Dummies®* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).*