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with resources

Tools to Build Authority in the 'Low Authority-High Responsibility Environment' **by Carl Pritchard**

The complaint is a common one :
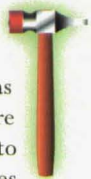*'My organization gives me all of this responsibility but with no authority over the resources'*

The symptoms are obvious:missed meetings, ignored directives, dropped objectives and frustration.

The cures are elusive. Some organizations try to build authority through analysis. Organizations wield the Strength Deployment Inventory, the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, and a host of other profiles and analysis tools in the hopes of aligning project management practice with functional team attitudes. Some strive for team-building to resolve the authority issue. Despite the fact that organization after organization struggles with project management authority, very few see fit to elevate the project manager within the hierarchy to afford him or her the requisite authority to do the job. As a result, the project manager is left in an environment where part of their job is to build authority. To build anything, you need tools. But the tools to build authority are sometimes challenging to find.

The tools are closely related to the type of the authority the project manager wants to build. Different tools support different authority types, and will often allow project managers to expand beyond their conventional capabilities. The authority types considered here include: expert (or technical), bureaucratic, charismatic, referent, and purse-string authority. For each type of authority, there are fundamental tools. And by using those tools, project managers can enhance their ability to exert authority over resources.

The tools of expert authority

The tools of expert authority are as varied as the areas of expertise. Before they're discussed, it's crucial to recognize that expert authority does not inherently mean that someone becomes an 'expert.' It is authority borne on a mutual understanding of information and on the ability to contribute within an area of expertise. Classic functional, or 'stovepipe' organizations tend to have a level of reverence for technical expertise, so the more the project manager can do to enhance his/her image as a technical authority, the better.

Since communication is a key to expert authority, the first and simplest tool is a glossary or dictionary of terms and their uses. For project management: *Project Management Terms: A Working Glossary*, by J. LeRoy Ward is a good pocket guide to the language. For those working in the 'Quality' world, John Bicheno's *The Quality 50* allows for a quick overview of how to speak the language of quality. These books are ideal, as they are not designed to teach the material in-depth, but do afford a means to share a common language with specialists in a field of endeavour.

There is a key rule to using the language of a field. Use it **only** as you truly understand it. There is no quicker way to undercut authority than to use the terms and terminology of a profession improperly. Over time, learning the language of a field leads to a better understanding of the challenges associated with that area of expertise.

The other key tools of expert authority are often rooted in the software of the field. Software applications are designed (theoretically) for quick use and application. They are not designed to take forever to learn (it just seems that way). As such, they often afford the quickest way to garner a modest amount of expert authority in a short timeframe. Even veterans in a field often appreciate help from those who have mastered or taken steps toward mastery of the software 'tools of the trade.'

The tools of bureaucratic authority

Bureaucratic authority always sounds less than desirable. It carries a tone of administrative overhead and waste. In fact, it is that aura that bestows power on those who know the bureaucracy. No one wants to learn it. Even more so, no one wants to spend time immersed in it. Hence, the power. Those capable of taming some tentacle of the bureaucratic monster inherently build a measure of authority.

What tools enable such subjugation? They sound as unexciting as the authority type itself. The organization chart, the chart of accounts and the internal newsletter (in whatever form it takes) are all key to building bureaucratic authority. How does a project manager use the tools? Know the documentation! When pieces of documentation are missing (eg, internal reports, business cases, employee files, etc), ask. Very few individuals in any organization truly take the time to know the breadth of the organization chart, even at a division level. The tools identified here work in concert one with the other to provide myriad opportunities to build bureaucratic authority. By reading the newsletter (or employee postings, or whatever), identifying the parties involved, and offering congratulations, support or guidance as appropriate, bureaucratic authority is a relatively quick and easy type of authority to build. And in many organizations, knowing and working through the bureaucracy is tantamount to 'owning' it.

The tools of purse-string authority

Money! Actually, it goes much, much further than that. The quest for the almighty pound, dollar or euro is not the sole source of purse-string authority. The currency of management often takes a host of other forms. In the low-authority environment, project managers rarely have the organizational clout to promise bonuses, rewards or even time off. As such, they must find other currency to exert purse string authority.

For many team members, the things they desire most are not fiscal in nature. Their wants and needs stem from their family,
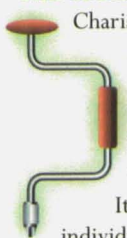
their hobbies, their personal interests and their professional advancement. To exert 'purse-string' authority, the project manager needs to find out what team members value. He/she needs to discover what matters most, and how to contribute to those critical issues. If a team member lives for choir practice on Tuesday night, the project manager may have some control on the team member's ability to meet that need. It can become the currency of their professional relationship. If a team member craves professional advancement, the project manager may be able to find technical challenges within the project that can serve as the bankroll.

To earn purse-string authority in such an environment, the project manager must invest the time and energy to learn what the team members value most. Such research can be time-consuming and awkward, and in some organization's cultures, un-precedented. It's important to recognize personal and organizational limits and taboos in regard to identifying the things team members treasure most.

There are tools to support such investigations. Personal interviews are the most obvious and effective. By talking through individual needs on a one-on-one basis, the project manager can determine what's going to be an effective inducement with that team member. Personality profiles and surveys can also provide insight on what matters most. A word of warning, however. profiles and surveys often provide generic information, not unlike a tabloid horoscope. The greatest value comes from those tools methodologies and approaches that yield insight about individuals, and individual needs.

The tools of charismatic authority
Charismatic authority is often thought of as a gift, rather than a tools-driven type of authority. In fact, charismatic authority is rarely rooted in an individual's ability to deploy Svengali-like powers. It is based instead on an individual's capacity to listen, learn and respond effectively to those around him or her.

What tools enable listening? Simple tools like active note-taking, for one. Echoing (repeating the words or phrases of others) is another means of ensuring that the message has been understood as heard. Clarification can be equally effective. But for charismatic authority, listening is not enough by itself.

The word 'charisma' is from the Greek. And the key words associated with charisma

from the Greek are 'grace' and 'favour.' Think about those who have handled themselves with true grace. Consider those who you want to be around. They are interested in you, and capture your interest. What tools do they use? Many times, they use subtle devices. Common language is one such powerful tool. Many of the great public speakers achieve their notoriety because of their ability to create 'inside' stories or jokes with the group they're addressing. They create a level of exclusivity by virtue of the language the use. They acknowledge their own foibles and relate them to those of their audience.

Ultimately, they respond, and generate responses. Select a communications tool and stick to it. Let those in the project team know how you communicate best and which tools are most effective for you. If you use e-mail as a primary communication tool, beware the tone. E-mail carries enormous power that can readily be overplayed. To build charismatic authority in e-mail, there's a simple trick. Remove the word 'you' as much as practical. The fewer times you say 'you' in an e-mail, the more collaborative, favourable, and gracious it sounds. If voicemail is the communications tool of choice, consider typing out a few notes before you leave the voicemail. It adds polish and affords you the opportunity to think through language your receiver will appreciate.

The tools of referent authority
Referent authority often hearkens back to our youth-a schoolteacher advising that 'Charles is in charge until I get back.' In the project environment, that authority often comes from management. But it is weak authority. Fortunately, the project environment affords some very basic tools to reinforce it. The project charter is a concept adopted in many organizations. It's a tool that documents the basic framework of the project and garners the commitment of the functional organizations providing resources. With upper management's signatures, the project charter is the classic tool of referent authority. It ensures that the functional organizations know which resources are committed and the duration for which they're committed. It grants the project manager authority that might not have otherwise existed. Any documentation that presents the project information, identifies the parties involved and bears signatures serves to build referent authority. While it's the weakest of the authority types, it still carries more weight than most PMs

give it credit for.

In most organizations, authority is seen as elusive. It is the province of a handful of those in upper management with position and title. In reality, authority is vested in those who build it. The basic tools outlined here, ranging from an organization chart to the project charter, all serve functions in building project management authority. It becomes incumbent on project managers to deploy these tools effectively to make their authority evident.
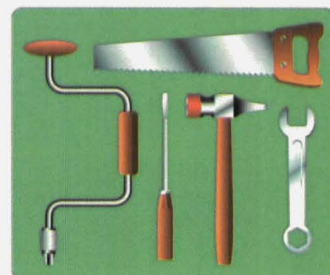
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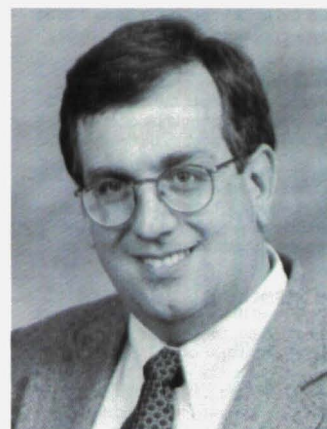
Carl Pritchard is the author of How to Build a Work Breakdown Structure (ESI Publications), editor of Risk Management: Concepts and Guidance (ESI Publications) and was a contributing author in David Cleland's A Field Guide to Project Management (Van Nostrand-Reinhold). He lectures internationally on project management topics and is principal of Pritchard Management Associates. His e-mail is cpritchard@worldnet.att.net