Providing "air cover" to your team

As you have learned so far, project managers build teams that meet project goals in many different ways, from delegating responsibility and prioritizing tasks to promoting trust and psychological safety.

But there is another skill great project managers have that we will cover in this reading: the ability to provide **air cover** to protect their team. Air cover refers to support for and protection of a team in the face of out-of-scope requests or criticism from leadership.

What is air cover?

A lot of what we have covered throughout this program has focused on leading and managing a project team. Much of project management involves overseeing the work of others, but it also involves managing the needs and expectations of those above you. Those people are your stakeholders, project sponsors, and other leaders within your organization.

Though the needs and requests of your stakeholders are crucial to the project's success, there may come a time when you will need to prioritize the needs of your team over the wants of your stakeholders. This is called providing "air cover" for your team, and it is an important part of managing a project. The ability to effectively provide air cover requires a trusting relationship between a project manager and their stakeholders. In this relationship, the project manager aims to demonstrate their abilities to lead a team and communicate effectively.

There is some risk involved in providing air cover. Sometimes a project manager provides air cover and the project team is still unable to deliver on the goals of the project. In this case, stakeholders may question the project manager's ability to complete projects successfully. So, when preparing to defend your team against out-of-scope requests, be sure that you are confident in your team's progress toward the project goal.

Providing air cover: A case study

Imagine, for example, that you are a project manager for a brand of coffee sold in supermarkets throughout your region. You and your team have been tasked with launching three new flavors of ground coffee: vanilla, hazelnut, and mocha.

However, well into the execution phase, your project sponsor sets a meeting with you to make an out-of-scope request: They would like to add a caramel-flavored coffee to the product lineup. Your team is already at maximum capacity preparing to launch the agreed-upon flavors, and a fourth flavor would add an unreasonable amount of work and stress to your very busy team.

Let's discuss how you might provide air cover for your team in a situation like this one.

Saying "No" without explicitly saying "No"

One way to provide air cover to your team is to say "no" to your sponsor's request without *explicitly* saying "no."

There are a few ways to do this:

You can gently push back with a polite explanation that their request won't be possible to complete under the current constraints—the scope, time, and/or cost—of the project.

You can politely offer to get back to the stakeholder with your response. This gives you time to better understand the request and to consult with trusted team members to lay out the benefits and costs of this request. And, if you are lucky, this might even give the stakeholder the opportunity to reconsider their request or forget about it entirely.

Whether you choose to push back immediately or get back to your stakeholder with your response, it is crucial to offer alternative solutions. Maybe the project timeline can expand to accommodate the request. Or maybe you and your team have a strong relationship with another team at the organization that can help fulfill the request. Whatever the alternative, brainstorming other options can help soften the blow and provide stakeholders with new ideas.

For example, you consider telling your sponsor that the current project timeline will only allow for the launch of three new coffee flavors, and that the launch of a fourth flavor would only be possible by pushing the launch date back by two months. If you were to respond to your sponsor in this way, you would be both gently refusing their request and offering them an alternative that could work for your team.

While a simple "no" response might frustrate the person making the request, gentle pushback paired with alternative options can protect your team from new work while preserving your professional relationship with stakeholders. If your stakeholders trust your leadership abilities and perspective, then they will be more likely to accept your pushback and alternative solutions.

Intervening from behind the scenes

Another way project managers provide air cover for their teams is to master the challenge of delicately intervening from behind the scenes when a stakeholder is making unrealistic requests or offering unreasonable critiques.

Continuing with our coffee company example, you know how hard your team has been working to launch the new products. To avoid causing the extra stress that might come with the knowledge that the stakeholder wants to increase their workload, you avoid sharing this request with your entire project team.

This doesn't mean you need to come up with a solution all by yourself, however. Instead of calling a team meeting to discuss the stakeholder's request for a new flavor, you consult with only two trusted members of your team to help brainstorm solutions. One of these team members mentions that they know two new flavors are slated to be added to the fall product lineup in six months, and that perhaps the caramel flavor could be launched then instead of with the current group. This would give your team more time to work on developing the product while still fulfilling the stakeholder's request.

Ultimately, you bring the suggestions of adding the flavor to the fall product lineup or pushing back the launch date of the current lineup to the project sponsor, and they accept your solution to launch the new flavor in the fall.

Managing the expectations of your stakeholder while looping in relevant teammates on a need-to-know basis was essential here. This allowed your team to focus on their work without the possibility of an increased workload or an unnecessary distraction.

Key takeaway

Providing air cover for your team takes practice. It requires a careful balance of the needs of your stakeholders and the needs of your project team. As you become more experienced in leading projects, you will develop a stronger sense of how to manage nuanced situations like these and provide the air cover your team needs to do their best work.

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