
Pin the Deputy's Badge On Me by James Barrowman

Deputized

I'm not sure I knew what I was getting myself into, but it seemed like a reasonable way to deal with the pressures our program was under. At the time manpower levels and budgets were being slashed left and right, and it wasn't just our Explorers Program at Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC). The whole NASA community was being downsized, and yet we were still expected to run effective programs.

As a Program Manager, you must try to create as much synergy as appropriate between projects. You look for ways that your Project Managers can share resources, ways they can work together and develop common solutions to management and technical problems. I was able to achieve these goals and others by taking on a unique role.

Each project was given only so many slots, FTEs (Full-time equivalent personnel), and I deliberately wanted to spend those slots on good technical people such as instrument systems managers, systems engineers, and resource analysts, the folks who accomplish the real work on the project. To maximize our technical resources and keep the program overhead down, I decided we would keep a thin layer of management. The management layer I thought we could manage without was the Deputy Program Manager and Deputy Project Managers. I told each Project Manager that I would act as his or her deputy.

In addition to reducing our overhead while maintaining technical positions, I felt this would change my relationship with the Project Managers from boss to supporter. It would give them a beneficial reason to keep me regularly informed on their projects' status and issues. I could be a consultant and make recommendations without threatening their authority or accountability. Finally, it would give them an additional resource during periods of peak demands on their time.

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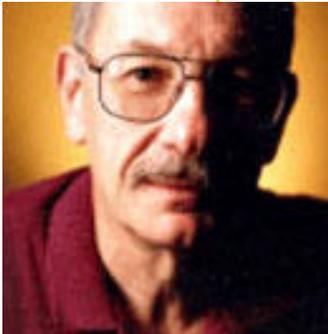
Pounding the Beat

It seemed like a plausible solution. Of course, I was not totally naive as to the difficulties. My time was hardly at a premium. No Program Manager can predict the exigencies that can pop up month-to-month, week-to-week, and even

day-to-day. I believed, however, I could handle the added responsibility and still lead an effective program.

The key to running a successful program is getting good people to work with you, and I had an excellent cadre of Project Managers. Also, I had hired a Program Business Manager with a keen understanding of the technical end of the program. This proved to be an enormous help to me, as I could rely on him to deal with the broader issues of the program when I was involved in specific project issues.

The main obstacle in my role as deputy turned out to be people's attitudes as to how a Program Manager was supposed to be treated on the floor. A few staff members at first seemed nervous and disoriented. There was even a bit of that old careful-what-you-say attitude. Eventually, as I became a familiar presence, they were able to relate to me as they would any other deputy.



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With the Project Managers, there was never any nervousness over how I should be handled. I suspect this was due in large part to the kind of working relationship we had already established. On the XTE project, for instance, when the Project Manager, Dale Schulz, asked me to address a problem concerning the interface between one of the major instruments and the spacecraft, he knew I would not blindside him by doing something we hadn't agreed on beforehand. I also kept him informed every step of the way.

If I did sometimes second guess a Project Manager, and there were indeed times I had a difference of opinion on matters, I never did so publicly. My approach was always to discuss it with the Project Manager privately, and what I had to say never was meant as a directive; it was always part of the exchange that occurs normally between a Project Manager and his or her deputy; and if I made my recommendation and the Project Manager felt differently, that was fine. I respected my Project Managers. Naturally, I would not have hired them otherwise.

Quick Change Artist

One episode during this period highlights the quick-change art I had to sometimes practice. When it was necessary, the program Manager would step to the

fore and the Deputy Project Manager stand in his shadow.

At one point, while XTE and another of our high profile projects, ACE, were still under development, Headquarters wanted us to start operating on a fixed price basis, what we now refer to as cost-cap missions. In return they promised to guarantee that funding would be available as needed.

The Project Managers were uncomfortable with engaging so directly with Headquarters, and understandably so. They were worried it would turn into something much too intrusive, and do more to disrupt our work on the projects than facilitate any kind of useful partnership. I felt differently, and here's where my leadership as a Program Manager had to come forward.

I understood what a benefit it would be to our program to form a partnership with Headquarters. I had been working with Headquarters for some time, at one point spending up to a day per week there, interfacing with Program Executives, Division Chiefs, discipline scientists, and others to cue them in on what was going on back at the Center (GSFC), all in an effort to improve communications. While it was an expensive loss of time in the short run, I knew in the long run the dividends it would pay were enormous.

I had to work with my Project Managers and their staffs to convince them that this was a good deal. Ultimately, I succeeded, and in the end I would say the arrangement we struck with Headquarters was very successful. It forced us to bring our projects in a box, as it were, and that was as important a team building exercise for Explorers as anything. We dug out those things that were not absolutely necessary from the budget and took the funding that was associated with them and put it back into the reserve fund, allocating the reserves to the subsystems and instruments, where it could do the most good.

I use this example to highlight that my team was willing to follow me because I had earned their trust working closely with everyone on all the projects. I don't know how many Program Managers would have had the same success with their teams, and I don't

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mean to suggest that I had a better relationship with my managers and staff than other Program Managers did with theirs; but I believe I had the advantage of being involved in each project and had built a level of trust with the Project Managers and their teams, and this made it possible for me to occasionally lead them where they were not prepared yet to go on their own. Certainly they would have gone along as the program Manager directed, but how effective a leader are you if they are only going half-heartedly or, worse, harboring a grudge?

Reflection

That I was able to handle the dual responsibilities of a Program Manager and a deputy Project Manager, I believe, is a testament to the talent we have in Explorers. Even with the many projects we had going, I never once felt over-

burdened. That's because few problems degenerated into a crisis. We had competent professionals on staff to solve problems before they ever reached this stage.

Certainly, accepting the responsibilities of a deputy Project Manager added demands on my time, but that meant I had to refine my time management skills, and so I did. I juggled what I needed and we got the job done. In the end the Project Managers and their staffs were satisfied, I was satisfied, and we were all able to operate an effective and efficient program.



LESSONS LEARNED

1. This age of paradox that requires you to do more with less demands paradoxical solutions, for example, the need to serve at the same time as the leader and the follower.
2. "Adaptive leadership" is required to help the organization do what it has never done before.
3. Soft is hard. Gaining the trust of your followers will grant you more influence than any formal authority.

QUESTION

Nowadays, contradictions *and* paradoxes are central to project management, for example, formal *and* informal processes, inward *and* outward attention, enabling *and* intervening leadership, and relying on analysis *and* intuition. Can you share with us how, and when, you became more aware of the need to manage contradictions? Can you share with us examples of paradoxical solutions that you have seen employed by successful project managers, or that you have employed in your own projects?