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Project Management and the Stockholm Syndrome

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Introduction

Project success in the world of client/vendor relationships hinges on two things: The ability of a project team to plan, manage and deliver results; and the ability to build and maintain relationships. Most project teams understand the pitfalls of delivery but many do not realize that another pitfall is associated with building relationships. For example, what happens when project managers or other team members begin to associate more closely with the client or vendor than with their own organization? This pitfall, which has the same characteristics as the Stockholm Syndrome, can be a significant risk for any project.

This paper addresses the topic of the Stockholm Syndrome as applied to project managers and project teams. This is not an in-depth research study into the psychological effects of managing stressful projects and how these stresses might cause a 'Stockholm Syndrome' effect. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview on the syndrome and give some insights into a real-world project where symptoms similar to hostage/captor appeared and how these symptoms were recognized and overcome.

The first section of the paper provides a brief description of the syndrome and an overview of hostage negotiation techniques used when authorities run across these situations. The second section provides a few tips and early warning signs that project managers and team members can use to avoid this pitfall and the final section. The third section provides a case study describing a recent project affected by project team members falling into the Stockholm Syndrome pitfall. The fourth and final section discusses the need for future research into behavioral, organizational and psychological aspects of managing project teams to ensure Stockholm Syndrome doesn't appear within the project team.

Introduction to the Stockholm Syndrome

On August 23, 1973, the robbery of the Kreditbanken in Stockholm Sweden set the stage for what has become known as the “Stockholm Syndrome”. During the robbery, two robbers took four bank employees hostage and over the course of five days the hostages began to feel emotionally attached to the robbers as though they felt that the robbers were protecting them while the police were trying to harm them. The emotional attachment to the robbers was so great that the hostages set up defense funds to help pay for the trial costs and even defended the robbers in court (de Fabrique, Romano, Vecchi, & Van Hasselt, 2007; Dewey, 2007).

Graham, Rawlings & Rimini described the Stockholm Syndrome as

An emotional attachment, a bond of interdependence between captive and captor that develops 'when someone threatens your life, deliberates, and doesn't kill you (Graham, Rawlings, & Rimini).

The syndrome has since been applied to any hostage situation where attachment to the hostage-taker occurs. Famous examples can be found in the events found in the true story behind the movie Dog Day Afternoon as well as the kidnapping of heiress Patty Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army. This syndrome has become common-place in many movies and fictional stories over the last thirty years.

The Stockholm syndrome has been described as a coping mechanism made up of three interconnected elements: **(1) Positive feelings toward captors; (2) Negative Feelings toward authorities; and (3) Positive feelings from captors toward hostages.** These three elements have been widely studied and used by hostage negotiators around the world to gain advantage over hostage takers.

Communication is an essential step in hostage negotiations. During a negotiation, negotiators attempt to answer the question: Why did this person take a hostage or hostages? During a hostage situation, negotiators will not typically argue with hostage-takers, nor do they disagree with their demands. They will employ delaying tactics, counter-offers and positive language to assure the hostage taker that everything will work out and gain the hostage takers trust.

In order to improve the relationship between negotiator and hostage-taker, the negotiator must be credible in the captor's eyes. Negotiators must walk a tight rope of showing empathy toward the captor, showing an understanding of their actions, remaining calm and assertive and maintaining a strong negotiating position.

Negotiators use the three elements that make up the Stockholm Syndrome as a roadmap to try to negotiate an ending to a hostage situation. A brief overview of how negotiators use this roadmap is provided below.

Understanding the captor's negative feelings towards authority

The longer a hostage situation lasts, the more likely it is that it will end peacefully. Researchers and negotiators have determined that prolonging the situation using stalling techniques results in a much more reliable and peaceful outcome. Examples of commonly used techniques to open communication channels and understand the captor's negative feelings towards authority are:

- Pushing back deadlines
- Focusing the attention of the hostage takers on 'trivial' demands such as vehicle type and color
- Asking open-ended questions

Creating positive feelings from captors toward hostages

Negotiators will try to encourage interaction and cooperation between hostages and captors in an effort to create positive feelings from the captors towards the hostages. Activities such as delivery of bulk food and medical supplies or items that have to be prepared are helpful. The interaction of the hostages and captors is meant as an exercise to build a bond between the hostage and captor and create the image of the hostage as a person in the eyes of the captor. Once a hostage taker bonds with the hostages and starts to see them as human beings, it becomes more difficult to harm them. This is one of the key elements in creating the transference phenomenon that 'creates' the Stockholm Syndrome. This transference allows the hostages to see the "good" in their captors and the captors to see the "good" in their hostages.

Positive feelings towards captors

In stressful, life or death situations, hostages search for evidence of hope and any sign that the situation may improve. Carver (2007) writes:

When a captor shows the [hostage](#) some small kindness, even though it is to the abusers benefit as well, the victim interprets that small kindness as a positive trait of the captor. In criminal/war hostage situations, letting the victim live is often enough. Small behaviors, such as allowing a bathroom visit or providing food/water, are enough to strengthen the [Stockholm Syndrome](#) in criminal hostage events (Carver, 2007).

During a life or death situation, hostages struggle to understand the issues and why things are happening. Their life is at stake so they begin to concentrate on surviving and become extremely aware of the reactions their captors have to their actions. Hostages begin to develop strategies for staying alive. These strategies include things like denial, lack of initiative, inability to act, attentiveness to captors 'wants', fear of interference by authorities and other types of coping strategies (Martinez, 1991).

Project Management & Stockholm Syndrome

By now, the reader is probably asking “what does any of this have to do with managing projects?” Project management, in most instances, is not a life-or-death situation, but dynamics similar to hostage situations do exist. Project Managers, especially those contracted for long term projects, can feel that their livelihood is being threatened when their project isn’t progressing as planned. Much like the hostages, the PM is caught between the interests of their company and their client.

In many projects, especially client/vendor projects, projects tend to be long, stressful and tedious affairs. During these projects, PM’s take on multiple roles of project manager, vendor/client manager, relationship manager and many more. In addition to basic project management processes and skills, a key to success in these projects is a project manager’s ability to build and maintain relationships. These relationships allow both parties to ensure that their needs are met, communication channels remain and client/vendor personnel act as a ‘team’.

When a project team comes under stress from compressed schedules, budgets or for other reasons, the relationships that are built between client/vendor provide a great deal of help to buffer some of this stress. This is a good thing. However, there are times when this stress can drive a member (or members) of a team closer to the ‘other side’. This is the moment when the Stockholm Syndrome ‘symptoms’ begin to appear.

Stockholm Syndrome as manifested in the business environment is a gradual process much like brainwashing that occurs in abusive relationships. The stress of completing complex projects can lead to the same dysfunctional emotional connection common in cases of Stockholm Syndrome and emotionally abusive relationships.

It is not uncommon for the project team member combating Stockholm Syndrome to be unable to objectively assess the client relationship or identify the signs of traumatic bonding. If the cycle continues, the project team member could experience self-esteem issues, degraded performance and lose the ability to make detached, project driven decisions while developing an enforced loyalty towards the client.

It is even more complex when the relationship is cyclic. When the client relationship alternates between positive feelings and traumatic bonding, the project team member finds themselves on a roller coaster of emotion alternating from hopelessness and despair to intense periods of euphoria when experiencing positive feelings from the client. The pursuit of these positive feelings often conflict with the goals and interests of the project team member’s employer and can lead to conflicts within the project team.

It is therefore necessary that the project team member be free to communicate with leadership regarding any concerns, or problems. The project team leadership must remain vigilante and aware of any behavior changes on the part of the project team member while creating an environment that encourages open honest communication. In the cases of complex and stressful projects, periodic evaluations should be conducted with all of the project team members.

Once harmful behavior patterns are identified, steps should be taken immediately to intervene and ensure that the project team member understands what is occurring. In most cases, a strong team member will notice that they have been ‘too close’ to their client (or vendor) and can step back and re-evaluate their approach. In some instances, it may make sense to remove the team member from the project. It is not always necessary to make permanent changes, often times a brief period of reflection away from the project or a temporary reassignment is all that is needed.

In cases where it is obvious that the project team member must be removed, project leaders should be prepared to respond to the client’s reaction. In cases of traumatic bonding the project client could take on behaviors similar to captors. Once a team member is removed, the client often enters a period of panic and anxiousness that could culminate in disbelief and threats to dissolve the relationship. It is at this point, not unlike hostage situations, that the relationship is most likely to spiral out of control. In these instances, it is important to identify these feelings and assure the client that all is well and that the relationship can be salvaged. In some cases it is helpful to review the patterns that resulted in the transference and discuss ways to mitigate the behavioral effects in the future.

Case Study – Real World Experience

ABC Corp, hired Jim Nasmith to manage the implementation of a document management system. Prior to hiring Jim, the organization had entered into an agreement with Enlighten to purchase a document management system and agreed to have another Enlighten do some development work to customize the system for their needs. The scope of the project was complex, but if everything went as planned, the implementation would be completed on time and would be a huge win for Enlighten.

During the project kick-off meeting, the standard Project Management Initiation steps were taken. Jim would be working for ABC Corp to manage the implementation and Enlighten would be responsible for all development and integration work. Roles and responsibilities were clearly defined, expectations set to, time lines calculated and all of the parties agreed on the next steps.

The implementation phase of the project had a very aggressive time line but seemed to be achievable. The successful DMS implementation would involve several teams at ABC Corp; Technology, Marketing and Media and would require careful attention to project management discipline. ABC Corp and Enlighten agreed that with proper communication and project management, the time lines could be met.

As most experienced Project Managers know, building relationships between stakeholders is a key step to success on any project. During this project, the relationships with the Enlighten, and especially with Enlighten's Project Manager, were nurtured to ensure that lines of communication remained open and any issues that might arise during the project could be shared without fear of reprisal.

After the first month of project work, both ABC Corp and Enlighten were feeling pinched for time and it was becoming evident that the agreed upon schedule was a bit too aggressive. Enlighten had to meet a very compressed schedule and tightly defined contractual obligations in order to earn their full payout. The stresses were starting to impact Enlighten's project manager and the first signs of traumatic bonding started to appear.

Enlighten's project manager was starting to feel pressure from his own management team to make sure that deliverables were met whatever the cost in order to earn the full payout. The Enlighten project manager started to question some of the methods and actions made by his project leadership team. This stress of being "caught in the middle" led to the Enlighten project manager beginning to feel closer to ABC Corp and the 'friends' he had developed there. He developed a deeper relationship with Jim and other members of ABC Corp project team and felt more synergy with the ABC Corp team than his own. The stress and pressure that he received from his own leadership team resulted in strong traumatic bonds and the 'positive feelings' common in Stockholm Syndrome towards captors started to manifest.

During this same period, the project team for ABC Corp was starting to feel some pressure as well. Enlighten milestones were not met and deliverables were slipping. Jim was starting to worry that the schedule was getting much too compressed to be achievable. The stress level started to rise. Jim began to feel considerably closer to the Enlighten's PM since they both were under the same amount of stress and 'understood' each other's plights. This empathy and shared experience led to a traumatic bonding experience of his own. As project manager for ABC Corp., Jim was responsible for the success or failure of the entire project. Jim returned the 'positive feelings' towards the Enlighten project manager and began to sympathize with his position. The traumatic bond between Jim and the Enlighten project manager slowly grew stronger and fostered the 'positive feelings' common in captors towards their hostages.

Since both sides of this client/vendor relationship were under a great deal of stress, the relationships between the project team members grew strengthening the traumatic bonds. Team members found solace and understanding with other members and felt as if it were the project team vs. "them". The team began to feel as though the leadership of the project (on both the vendor and client side) didn't understand the difficulties in the project. It was only natural that negative feelings towards the project leadership team evolved.

By the time signs of Stockholm Syndrome behavior developed, the project was about one month behind schedule and was on track to come in over budget. A meeting was held between Enlighten and ABC Corp to discuss a path forward. During this meeting, the Enlighten PM began making statements that were completely out of character and not appropriate for a professional project manager. Statements such as "this system isn't right for you", "our developers can't get this done", "we aren't billing you fairly" and other comments are not what you would expect from a professional. The Enlighten PM was not new to project management, he was a business owner and had a long history of positive customer experiences. It is not until you examine this behavior as an affect of Stockholm Syndrome that you can see the bigger picture. When inserted into the appropriate context of being closer to ABC Corp than to his own

organization, it makes sense that he would point out that the system isn't "right" for them as an attempt to create positive feelings and voice his negative feelings towards authority.

Needless to say, Enlighten wasn't happy with their project manager's comments nor was ABC Corp. It became very apparent to the leadership at Enlighten and ABC Corp that they needed to make some changes to their project team. The Project Manager for Enlighten was removed and replaced. Jim Nesmith and the rest of the ABC Corp project team were asked to rethink their approach and evaluate their relationship with the Enlighten team.

After the changes were made to the project team, Jim and the new Enlighten PM were able to talk through the previous issues. Jim realized that the relationship he developed with the previous project manager was too close to allow for an accurate assessment of progress. The project was completed successfully once the negative behavior patterns were identified and addressed by all of the project team members.

Future Research

Considerable avenues exist for further research in the area of interpersonal behavior, organizational behavior and affects of stress on project team members. This area seems to be overlooked as a research focus for most academics.

Topics to be considered for further research are:

- How can a project manager determine when project members have become to 'close' to their counterparts to be able to fully assess progress?
- At what level of stress does a project team member 'cross over' from being overly friendly to their counterparts into areas defined as being closer to Stockholm Syndrome symptoms?
- Are there any management methods that can be employed to catch stressful situations before they blossom into a Stockholm Syndrome effect?

Conclusion

Although the Stockholm Syndrome was named after situations that involved hostages and captors, the basic psychological reasons for the syndrome can be applied to less serious aspects of life, like project management. The three elements that make up the Stockholm Syndrome (hostages' closeness to captors, captors' closeness to hostages, negative feelings towards authorities) can easily be expressed by project team members during stressful times.

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper isn't meant to be an academic study of the psychological reasons the Stockholm syndrome nor why a variant of this syndrome can be seen in some project teams. This paper has hopefully served two purposes: 1.) create a dialogue

around the aspect of stress and its effects on project team members; and 2.) provide insight in to stressful situations such as projects that are over-budget and behind schedule, causing otherwise great project team members to exhibit unprofessional behaviors.

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