

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

Project Management –
Addressing the Human Bottleneck

By Donald A. Pillittere

Can't We Just Fire Tim?

Who's Tim? Well Tim is the adult version of Herbie, the slow moving Boy Scout made famous in Eliyahu Goldratt's book *The Goal* that provides guidance for overcoming system constraints. In other words, Tim is the human constraint or bottleneck that puts the program behind schedule. We've all had experiences with a human constraint like Tim. These are the masters of incompetence that seem to live just under the corporate radar when everyone on the team knows that their presence is hurting any chances of achieving some critical time-to-market objective.

However, Tim cannot be underestimated for he possesses great powers of prestidigitation and illusion that any magician would admire. Tim is always busy constantly reminding all within ear shot of the many tasks he is juggling at once. He manages to work on tasks that best suit his interest whether or not they will enhance the project. Tim is a friendly sort and often plays cards or enjoys a rigorous game of volleyball with his peers. He fits in perfectly with any and all non-work related activities. Tim is also the one that brings in those fresh hot cinnamon buns on Friday mornings.

Tim is the shiny toy that looks great in the store, has great features (resume) and talks well in public. He fools many at first; it is only after months of on the job observation do people realize that there is not much more to Tim than his bright exterior. In fact the public persona is what gives the illusion of competence. Tim is hard to pin down and place on a schedule since he is adept at hearing what he wants in conversations and working on low priority tasks. But at performance appraisal time, there is a plethora of achievements that could make any Type A individual cringe with envy. Tim knows how to document anything that is self-promoting.

One more thing, Tim has an unusually high perception of his abilities, another characteristic that the project manager and peers have to deal with. Don't get me wrong, skills and knowledge do come with the package, but these are not of the Superman variety that is in the mind of the beholder. However the skills at Tim's disposal are not always applied to the project in an effective manner. But given an opportunity to showcase these talents, Tim can display them like a Vegas showman.

The problem with our human bottleneck is that the 90-day window for returns has passed and we are stuck with him. Or worst yet we've lost the store receipt. This predicament frustrates many smart people because they're the ones who hired Tim in the first place. Everyone continues to ask the same question, "How did we get fooled, we are smarter than this." And, "How do we mitigate this human impediment to move the program forward?"

Send Him to The Glue Factory!

Just kidding. This is probably the first thought that comes to mind. After all, when an animal is unable to work, putting them out to pasture (or if they're lucky stud) is a routine course of action. And, we are not sending Tim to the stud farm! Certainly in the animal kingdom handling an under performing mammal is a lot less complicated than dealing with humans. How about that tried and true method of behavior modification made famous in Singapore - caning? No that will get us in trouble with human resources. Almost forgot about them, maybe they have some guidelines we can use to turn around Tim's performance.

There is something about Tim that brings out the worst in peers. There is really a barbaric reaction that causes even the nicest people to want to quickly and effectively remove this individual from the team. Unfortunately, many times the methods of doing so are harsh. However, the project manager must not fall into this feeding frenzy. He or she must quietly find a way to address the situation. The first problem is that many project managers lack the skill or patience to deal with constraints that involve employees, given all of their other duties. The best way to tackle this is to integrate the transformation of Tim into everyday activities to make it a natural course of action. You could always take the straightforward approach and call Tim into the office and tell him that his tasks have become the critical path. If he doesn't remedy the situation, he's fired. Nowadays this is just not practical, even if this was the supervisor's normal way of dealing with these types of individuals. Human Resources is still going to require a paper trail to ensure that Tim doesn't hire a lawyer and sue the company.

So where do you start after the initial reaction sending Tim to the Glue Factory? Well, you have to get into Tim's world, what is he working on, how much time is he spending on task, is there clear direction around deliverables, are timelines set for task, is he working on the right priorities, is he getting help from others to complete these task, and on and on. The only way to fix a problem is to gather data, even with people. You have to understand the current state before moving forward to nirvana. Without a starting point, both parties will be going nowhere fast. After all, the ultimate responsibility for the success of the program rests on the project manager, even if Tim is on the team.

What follows is a process that helps map out Tim's contribution to team or lack thereof, the needs of the team, and how Tim can positively impact the team, while maintaining his self-esteem. Caution, this process requires data to understand current state, patience to implement the plan, and some gentle cajoling to eliminate Tim as the bottleneck. After that, it's off to the next bottleneck.

Workload – “The Current State”

Maybe we are being unfair to Tim, is it possible that he has too many tasks to complete for one person – don’t laugh, this is a possibility, although far-fetched. In order to find out, a project manager should take the direct approach, sit down with him and go over current and future project tasks. Schedule these meetings on a regular basis to understand Tim’s role in the bottleneck and to determine what it will take to resolve the problem. It is of utmost importance at these meetings to precisely write down all tasks, start dates, durations, priorities and probabilities of success. There must be a mutual understanding of these at the meeting. If this is not achieved, the behavior that led to the project’s bottleneck will continue. These meetings will help determine whether angioplasty or bypass surgery will be required to remove the blockage.

This contract, and yes it must be a contract, is the start of getting at the root-cause of the problem. Without written data (tasks and timelines), the chances of turning the corner on the project will be greatly diminished and dollars that could be better spent elsewhere will be shredded by program delays. It’s the starting point for really getting at those capabilities that Tim can provide in order to meet critical timelines. Instead of working hard to get nowhere, the roadmap to the end goal can be defined, with specific roadblocks and trouble spots clearly marked to the path of least resistance.

In *The Goal*, Herbie was loaded down with gear and food, so the Scout Leader redistributed his load to improve hiking speed or throughput. This simple move better balanced the process and drastically changed the team dynamics. If we look at Tim’s workload, we can shift or redistribute his workload to improve throughput. Easy fixes might not be obvious at the kickoff meeting, so patience is a must. As with all quality tools, the next meeting will provide actual versus estimated progress so the project manager can zoom in on the most critical areas to address. And more importantly better understand Tim’s process capability or Cpk.

Focus

After the first couple of documented meetings with Tim, the project manager should now start to get a handle on how well Tim’s focus matches the needs of the team. The good thing about writing down tasks, with start dates, durations etc. is that instead of focusing on Tim’s shortcomings or improvement opportunities, the manager can look at the data. It is amazing to see how people, even if part of the problem, jumped at the chance to help fix a problem once data is presented. Data is the common ground that takes out human emotions and allows people to relax and look for ways to permanently resolve an issue.

Given Tim’s desire to impress peers, he could very well be working on tasks that help others in the organization, to the detriment of the team. After all, praise for most teams are minimal throughout the project, typically coming at the end in the form of a luncheon

or some fashion challenged article of clothing. Tim's need for constant stroking uncommon for project work could lead him to inadvertently doing work that provides recognition. Small jobs can add up and in many circumstances take precious time away from critical tasks. Being able to review the status of each and every task enables the manager to redirect Tim's focus.

Another potential cause for Tim's emergence as the bottleneck is analysis paralysis – overanalyzing tasks with no apparent forward progress. Again, comparing agreed upon tasks from last meeting, progress to date, and delta from goal, should bring this to light. The objective of this step is to focus Tim on how he can help the project and the proclivity of the supervisor to take advantage of his skills. The result of this portion of the improvement plan should result in a modified contract; that now transitions Tim away from his non-critical to team tasks. Many business people go to great lengths working on tasks that at the end of the day do nothing for customer satisfaction or shareholder value. Modifying Tim's contract to focus on profitable team goals is essential.

Rebalancing

The aforementioned patience that this process takes is no more apparent than realizing that Tim's capacity even if working on those tasks that match his skills is not going to eliminate the critical path. Here is where the project leader makes his or her salary, how to reallocate work to other team members or others in organization that Tim can't get done in a timely fashion. Rebalancing brings along other problems that must be managed, such as questions from those that are given some of Tim's workload who believe a better solution would be to escort him out the door.

This step should not be considered the business equivalent of shuffling the chairs on the Titanic, knowing that the ship is eventually going to sink. It really is taking more off Tim's plate because his capacity for work is lower than the demand. Without freeing up capacity from someone else, the time-to-market objectives will be nothing more than a dream. In the meantime, the business will consume excess resources, capital, and cash and delay any potential revenue.

Rebalancing is a juggling act, no pun intended! The project manager can't rebalance Tim's workload and in the process make someone else the bottleneck. To do this right is going to take some time to analyze the team's workload and look for others internal/external to the organization that can take up the slack and keep the project moving. The prowess to efficiently rebalance the various tasks is the characteristic that separates the great project leader from the good.

Positive Reinforcement

As with all humans, like Tim, any transition or improvement plan must include a heavy dose of positive reinforcement. It is analogous to potty training a dog, as much as you

want to scold them for doing their business on the kitchen floor, you must commend them when they hold off for the great outdoors. So it is with Tim, we must look for ways to praise him instead of rubbing his nose into the pile of delay dung!

This is not going to be easy, because the first instinct with Tim is to place your hands around his neck. No, I do not promote violence; it's just that Tim brings out the worst in everyone. Positive reinforcement hopefully fosters the behavior we want from Tim. It's the same thing we should be doing in a sincere way with other team members.

It could be in the form of a handwritten note, a small gift certificate to Starbucks (my personal favorite), or a compliment during a team meeting. Simple is better, sincere is better yet, it's not as if we have to hold a ticker tape parade in Tim's honor if he completes a critical task on time.

Trade Him

So far we have looked at Tim's workload, focused him on important tasks, rebalanced his load based on his personal Cpk, if our patience hasn't been worn thin by now there is still more that can be done. Well, we could trade him to some other department by singing his praises only to pawn him off and give greater credence to the Peter Principle and fodder for the next Dilbert Cartoon. Or we can truly look at where he might actually find a home and make a positive impact. What I liked to call employee Tetris, some call it human development.

Yeah Tetris that popular falling block puzzle game designed by Alexey Pajitnoc that derived its name from the Greek prefix "tetra": meaning four – since all pieces in the game contained four segments. If each employee was a different shape and color piece, how does a supervisor or manager place these in order to satisfy customers and win the game? To start, one must ask, "What shape and color is Tim and where in the company can he fit? Can his skills be better put to use somewhere else?"

I like to think that if there is a soul mate for everyone in the world, there is also a job for everyone, even Tim. It's the project manager's role to help fit the human piece called Tim into the business puzzle. After all, any employee that has been around a company gains valuable knowledge about products, competitors, and business processes that can be beneficial within the organization. Therefore, it would be a waste of the company's investment to throw employees like Tim out without looking for a new home. What if there really isn't a place for Tim? Then it's time to show him the door.

Open The Door

Typically the choice of leaving a company is determined by the employee or the employer. The project manager after many attempts at working with Tim to enhance his contributions; might decide that the best thing for everyone is to open the door and let

him go. If he or she is lucky, Tim might find his way out before this decision has to be made. I have been in this fortunate position in the past.

Even if it comes to this step, it certainly can't hurt to re-address the situation one more time – this all depends on the project manager's reserve of patience. Clearly all of Tim's peers would welcome his ultimate departure, however, the project manager's role is different. He or she must make sure that all avenues have been explored before taking the permanent step of firing Tim. Time for one more heart-to-heart talk with Tim to give him one more opportunity to turn things around – this will be the last attempt. Just remember, if you are going to fire Tim, make sure his inability to meet job requirements is well documented, or you might end up facing him in Judge Judy's court! If you want to guarantee this scenario, then drive him to the glue factory – only kidding.

Conclusion

Many project managers have had the pleasure or pain of working with a Tim, but can we honestly say to ourselves that we've worked as hard on this problem as others in business. Unfortunately in business, the people problems are a lot more complex than those related to things such as equipment, part failures or logistic mix-ups. However, there is a real business cost of letting someone like Tim go – the knowledge, experience and dollars invested in him by the corporation, not to mention the possibility of a lawsuit.

So next time your blood boils as Tim walks into a meeting and states that he is behind schedule or has spent a week working on an outdated product specification, take a deep breath and figure out what can be done to address the situation. Saving Tim might not be easy, but at least it is worth a try. Everyone has been a Tim in the past, maybe not for the same extended period of time, but who can say they've always delivered on time. It could simply be a misunderstanding, a brand new job that is taking more time to acclimate too, or an intrinsic problem with the individual. Following this process can help you determine the root-cause and doing your best to address the situation.

Editor's note: The author's use of the name "Tim" was not intended to refer to or offend any person named Tim, nor the name itself. It was an entirely arbitrary use of a name to illustrate the points of the article.

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