

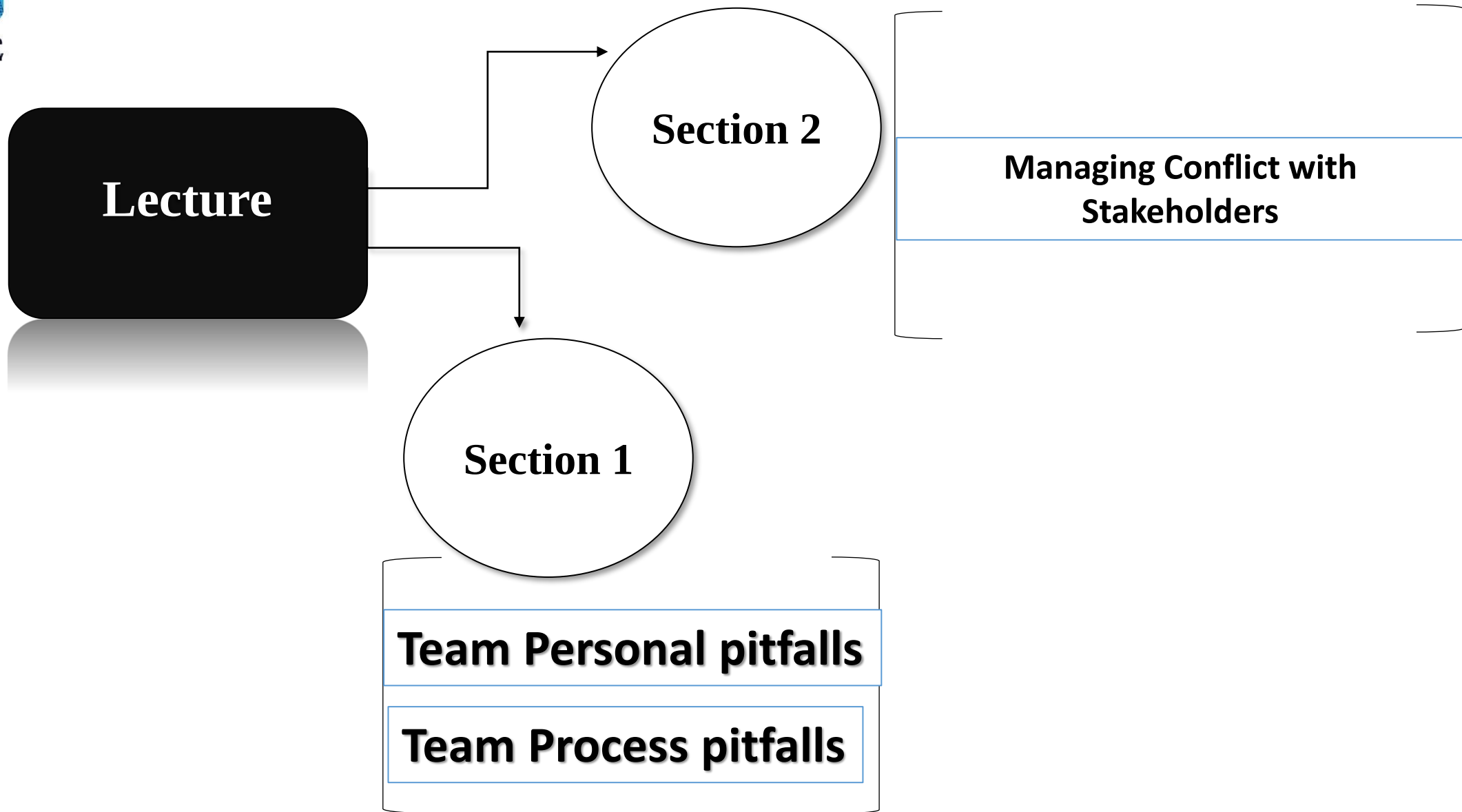


Everyone's Smart
University

Team pitfalls

Chapter 8

Project communication



Section one

Team Personal pitfalls

Team Pitfalls

Some errors are available to any group of people working together through a plan or circumstance. The following pitfalls apply to team interaction with each other and with those around them - their effects are felt within the team and on the project they are working on:

Team Personal Pitfalls

These pitfalls arise due to behavioral differences and character conflicts.

Team Personal Pitfalls

Blamestorming



During a "blame storm," team members spend unproductive time admiring the problem, describing how it went, and seeking to assign blame and responsibility. This has the tone of the Inquisition and forces people to quarter rather than learn from mistakes.

- **The Fix:**
- Measure progress based on facts, not opinions.
- Focus on the most important issues first — and the actions needed to resolve them, rather than the blame.
- Create a culture where mistakes are learning opportunities, not weaknesses.

Team Personal pitfalls

Team Personal Pitfalls

Blowhard Jamboree



In this pitfall, opinions, misinformation, or bias of (so-called) experts improperly influence important decisions. Because these opinions or misinformation are often touted as facts, they can form a flawed basis for planning, estimating, and other important project decisions that carry repercussions down the line.

• The Fix:

Be honest about why you have an opinion. If evidence to support that opinion is not immediately obvious, spend more time analyzing the problem and potential solutions. Avoid poor sources of misinformation by assigning or seeking subject matter experts who are responsible for finding and sharing relevant, fact-based input.

Team Personal Pitfalls

Groupthink

One of the more well-known pitfalls, groupthink happens when teams value harmony and conformity over diversity of thought. This typically results in a less creative decision-making process and less opposing viewpoints, defeating one of the main benefits of making decisions as a group.

- **The Fix:**

Conflict should not be viewed as negative and the leader should be replaced with a facilitator if possible to avoid undue influence. Other options include randomly dividing the group in half and separating for two concurrent sub-group discussions.

Heroics

Some projects succeed in spite of poor planning, execution, and expectation management due to long hours, overtime, and neglectful singlemindedness. “Heroes,” the team’s most valuable members whose extraordinary effort lead to project “success,” often feel overworked and under-appreciated, which may lead to their departure. Project leaders or team members who see the project schedule realistically are often seen as pessimists or “non-believers.”

- **The Fix:**
- Because this practice seems to be a part of so many organizational cultures, modern methods such as Agile emphasize a “sustainable pace”.
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- Remember that encouraging a “can-do” attitude can create an environment that suppresses accuracy in estimates and execution.
-
- Strive to build a culture that values good work/life balance

Intellectual Violence

This practice commonly plays out as one party understands a theory, technology, or buzzword uses this knowledge to intimidate or subjugate others in a public or meeting situation.

This can result in a closed and defensive culture where everyone becomes afraid of revealing inexperience or lack of understanding in an ever-escalating war of information. Keep in mind that this sometimes happens inadvertently.

- **The Fix:**

The awareness that another party doesn't know something is a make-or-break moment—instead of intellectual violence, the same situation makes the perfect opportunity for mentorship between the two parties, and a potentially disastrous situation becomes an opportunity for personal and team growth.

Loose Cannon

Delivering projects and working in the team environment often comes with tight deadlines, difficult work products, and a whole host of variously unpleasant conditions. Because of these conditions, a team member who constantly creates disruption can have a multiplicative effect on the rest of the team. Often putting politics before substance, these individuals can have a demotivating effect on the team and present a risk to the project.

- **The Fix:**

Beyond obvious tactics like termination, this risk can often be mitigated by providing the loose cannon with a mentor or one-on-one time with the manager. If the resource is an expert or the quality of their work is valuable, physically transferring them or offering a work-from-home option could alleviate the situation.

Poor project team/ stakeholder relations

In some cases, stakeholders just won't "click" with the project team. This may be because of differences in personality (i.e. motivators, influencers, culture), the result of schedule pressure, or because of unrealistic expectations each group has on the other.

The reality is that business is often conducted in ways that cause friction—negotiation, financial transactions, market forces, and priority are all potential "agitators" that contribute to this intense dynamic.

- **The Fix:**
- If friction is occurring with stakeholders, the simplest option may be to choose one person in either party through which to funnel all communication.
-
- In stressful times, some grumbling is common and could even provide some stress relief, but this should remain internal to the team. Proper estimating, scheduling, tracking, and risk management activities will often alleviate or remove the largest stressors.

Wishful thinking

Wishful thinking may be the most common pitfall teams experience. Examples include insufficient planning, ignoring risks, creating overly optimistic schedules, asking for an extended deadline but offering to complete more work before that deadline and assuming that contractors or external resources will always deliver quality work on time with little monitoring.

- **The Fix:**

Don't confuse positive thinking or optimism with wishful thinking.

Realistically consider future scenarios—if one or more elements of your plan require things to go “just right,” you may be falling victim to wishful thinking.

The only real cure for this is realistic planning/scheduling/tracking

Section one

Team Process pitfalls

Team Process Pitfalls

In addition to problems that arise when individuals come together as a team, the act of initiating, planning, and executing project work contributes its own set of perils that need to be monitored for and addressed to ensure smooth operation.

The following pitfalls mostly relate to the processes needed to effectively carry out a project:

Analysis Paralysis

Although many teams make the opposite mistake, analysis paralysis involves a reluctance to move out of the early planning stages of a project. This may be caused by a fear of failure or accountability, micromanagement, or a problem that has no apparent solution. If a project spends too much time in these stages, it may experience schedule pressure at later stages or even “death by planning”—an overly complex plan that crushes project work with process.

- **The Fix:**

If the problem seems unsolvable, prototyping may help. Otherwise, the team may benefit from an incremental process and a willingness to learn from failure.

Fire Drill

The early causes of a “fire drill” include uncertainty around requirements or design, a hesitation to begin, or another early-project delay. Later in the project cycle, a series of ambitious or unrealistic goals are set or priorities are shifted frequently resulting in constant chaos.

In some organizations, the constantly changing, reactive nature of fire drills is the norm. It should be noted that some team members prefer this chaos, because their mediocre work is less likely to be noticed. At all costs, however, these situations are red flags that should not be ignored.

- **The Fix:**

Short of changing the circumstances, “project leader sheltering” is the most readily available solution. In this model, progress is internally steadied and better planned; externally, the leader acts as a single liaison to management and most stakeholders, rationally prioritizing work for the team to mitigate the chaos experienced earlier in the project’s life cycle.

Ineffectively Adding Resources to the team

Although many examples of this exist, the two most common are a lack of a proper training and integration procedure for new team members and the ineffective managing of contractors.

In some cases, project leaders try adding people late in the project hoping to “catch up” on missed work only to find that integrating the new resources leaves the team further behind.

- **The Fix:**

Adding resources should be planned with the understanding of when they are needed, how much lead time is needed to “bring them up to speed,” and how much management effort will be needed to utilize them effectively.

Rushing to the execution

Rushing to the execution phase of projects can become so commonplace that people may begin to accept the consequences of doing so as fact rather than circumstance.

Examples of vital planning steps that are often shortchanged in this situation include receiving stakeholder approval on requirements/specifications, design iterations, estimation activities, and risk management. Failing to properly complete *upstream* activities like these can have a major effect on the final product's quality.

- **The Fix:**

The obvious solution here is to properly consider important early-project activities; one strategy that may help is to adopt a process that rewards a commitment to these activities and has well-respected “gates” which require thoroughly completing each step before proceeding to the next.

Silver Bullet

In the same way that a silver bullet may be considered a quick and easy solution for werewolves, many teams make the mistake of thinking that a new tool, technology, or process will have magical effect on their projects.

This impression might come from wishful thinking or other projects that have seen (or advertised) success. As reality sets in, many projects find themselves behind schedule, their mistaken optimism turned to disappointment.

- **The Fix:**

Just as potential problems are managed as risks, so should opportunities
Like risks, opportunities aren't certainties and should be approached systematically and cautiously.

The short answer is yes, but they are unlikely to appear on most risk registers. Because of their broad, universal nature, pitfalls are hard to quantify into the probability and impact calculations needed to analyze them. They are a risk that must be monitored by both the team and the team leader, and simply understanding the nature of each pitfall is often enough to promote resistance to their taking root.

Each of the pitfalls in this chapter represents a constant hazard to both the team and the project it's working on, but there are parts of the project that represent "hot-spots," or areas of increased likelihood where the pitfall may manifest itself.

Are Pitfalls risks?

If pitfalls do occur, their negative results will inevitably manifest themselves later in the project when “the damage has already been done.” Put another way, mistakes or circumstances have a *downstream* effect on a project—this means that project leaders must carefully consider *upstream* manifestations of pitfalls as the project progresses and work to mitigate their effects down the road.

Team Pitfalls

Although these pitfalls seem diverse, avoiding and resolving them long-term requires the following:

- An awareness of both what can happen and when it's most likely to occur,
- Diligence and continuous introspection,
- Management and leadership support, and
- A deliberate culture shift within the team and organization.

Section Two

Managing Conflict with Stakeholders

Managing conflict within the project team involves direct conflict management approaches and skilled communication. The goal is to preserve team cohesion and come to an agreement on the best way to resolve the conflict so that the team can move forward in achieving the project objectives.

However, conflict outside the project team can materialize in very different ways that may require different approaches. Here are three common scenarios where you must work through conflict with stakeholders outside of the project team:

1. Working with stakeholders who are resistant to the project

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

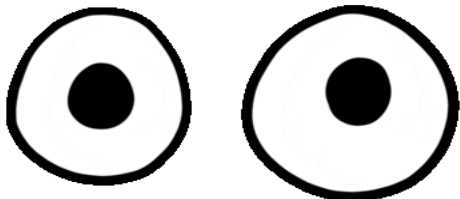
3. Handling conflict between project stakeholders

1. Working with stakeholders who are resistant to the project

Many projects, especially those that can significantly disrupt “business as usual,” will likely have stakeholders who do not support the project.

We examined the spectrum of stakeholder support, from unaware or resistant to supportive or leading. Those on the resistant side of the spectrum may say or do things to weaken support for, or even interfere with, the project.

Once you identify stakeholders who may be resistant to your project, the following recommendations may help minimize their resistance, reduce the likelihood of conflict or its intensity when it arises, and even move them toward being more supportive of the project:



1. Working with stakeholders who are resistant to the project

Once you identify stakeholders who may be resistant to your project, the following recommendations may help minimize their resistance, reduce the likelihood of conflict or its intensity when it arises, and even move them toward being more supportive of the project:

Communicate early and frequently. Keep resistant stakeholders in the loop.

This can help build trust by demonstrating that you understand and respect their interest and/or impact on the project, and want to engage with them despite their disposition toward the project.

1. Working with stakeholders who are resistant to the project

Once you identify stakeholders who may be resistant to your project, the following recommendations may help minimize their resistance, reduce the likelihood of conflict or its intensity when it arises, and even move them toward being more supportive of the project:

Build these communications into your project communications management plan.

Seek feedback regularly. Check in with these stakeholders either with a set frequency (e.g. monthly) or at project milestones.

Encourage honest feedback, and provide direct responses to their concerns to the greatest extent possible.

1. Working with stakeholders who are resistant to the project

Once you identify stakeholders who may be resistant to your project, the following recommendations may help minimize their resistance, reduce the likelihood of conflict or its intensity when it arises, and even move them toward being more supportive of the project:

Don't forget to refer back to your stakeholder analysis and project communications management plan when communicating with stakeholders.

Get the stakeholder involved. If the stakeholder is particularly resistant, or if you are not successfully able to address their concerns on your own, engage them in working with you toward a solution.

Get their input on what it will take to reduce or resolve their resistance to the project, and then ask them to help in putting that solution into practice.

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

Another stakeholder situation that may involve conflict is having to communicate bad news to key stakeholders who have a high level of interest and/or investment in the project.



For example, a problem may arise that results in project work needing to be done over, causing a delay in the project schedule. How do you communicate this news that key stakeholders may not want to hear, and may react poorly to? What you say is important, but so is when and how you say it.

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

Here are some recommendations on how to conduct these difficult conversations:

What:

Focus on what happened, how it impacts the project—cost, schedule, scope, etc.—and how it is going to be corrected and prevented moving forward.

Give a clear explanation of the problem and why it occurred.

Do not focus on who is at fault; instead, focus on how you plan to fix the problem and/or prevent it from recurring, and how you will minimize the negative impact on the project. Some of this may already be addressed in your risk management planning.

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

Here are some recommendations on how to conduct these difficult conversations:

When:

The higher the stakes, the sooner you should tell the stakeholder(s). In some cases, immediate action can help mitigate the effects of the problem.

As soon as you understand the source and impacts of the issue and have identified a plan of corrective action, talk to the stakeholder.

If you are not able to propose corrective action immediately, you will still want to inform the stakeholder and ask for their support in developing a solution.

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

Here are some recommendations on how to conduct these difficult conversations:

How:

Negative news should be delivered in person, or at least through a real-time, two-way channel such as a telephone call or video call.

This can be intimidating because the stakeholder may not react well to the news, regardless of how supportive of the project they may be.

Despite this possibility, do not use an asynchronous communication channel like e-mail or text. Real-time conversations allow the stakeholder to ask questions, show them that you are accountable for the project, and help preserve trust and relationships despite the problem at hand.

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

What should project manager do if the stakeholder react poorly?

Focus first on de-escalating the interaction. Keep the focus on resolving the issue and honestly answering the stakeholder's questions. When you conclude the conversation, reinforce your commitment to correcting the action, and affirm the stakeholder's buy-in to the solution and the project as a whole.

Once the issue is addressed, don't forget the follow-up. Continue to keep affected stakeholders apprised with updates on the proposed solution and its effectiveness. This can be done through ad hoc communications when necessary, or within planned communication methods like status reports.

2. Communicating project setbacks to stakeholders

What should project manager do if the stakeholder react poorly?

Finally, identify and document the lessons learned. This will benefit you, the project, and the project team going forward to prevent or mitigate similar issues from affecting this project as well as future projects. And don't forget to update your project communications management plan as needed.

3. Handling conflict between project stakeholders

Stakeholders have different expectations and priorities for projects—this is the “what’s in it for me”, or WIIFM concept. Interpersonal conflict can also occur between stakeholders, just as it can occur among members of the project team. Potential areas for interpersonal conflict can be identified as you conduct a thorough analysis of your stakeholder audience, including role, power and influence, level of support, and priorities and expectations. This is also an area where expert judgment can be useful.

3. Handling conflict between project stakeholders

When talking with stakeholder groups, listen closely for any clues that may indicate conflict with other stakeholders.

A member of the executive team may remark that he has had a past negative experience with a resource manager or a vendor. Note these potential issues so that you can be on the lookout for conflicts that may arise. As you identify stakeholder priorities and document them in your stakeholder register, spend some time reviewing where expectations or personalities may conflict.

Depending on the size and complexity of your project, you may want to ask the project team to contribute to this exercise as well. If conflict occurs between stakeholders, address it early to prevent it from escalating and putting the project at risk.

3. Handling conflict between project stakeholders

Because project managers and team members have no functional authority over most stakeholders, seeking support from other organizational resources such as project leadership, senior management, or human resources may be necessary.

In any given project, there's a good chance something will not go according to plan. Sometimes these are identified risks that materialize, and sometimes they are unexpected. No matter what the issue, conflict can result. Using effective communication strategies like those discussed in this chapter can have a major impact on how the conflict affects the project, and on your reputation and effectiveness as a project manager. Remember: It's not about whether things go wrong, it's about how you handle them when they do.