

## Nobody will do what you expect...

The third law of project management should be read in reverse; do not assume that your project team members (or anyone else, for that matter) will do as you expect.

This law is a spur to the project manager to take a very proactive approach to dealing with project resources.

It is worth remembering that most project resources do not volunteer to work on your project, they are assigned, usually alongside what might be a full-time day job.

They are not generally lazy or evil people, but certainly are very busy. Your project is an extra piece of work thrown on the top of their other commitments.

And in many organisations the performance appraisal system is often based upon the day job, not the project, so when things get tight for the team member where will the attention go?

So, how can we deal with Project Law Number 3?

Well, it needs a mixture of involvement and communication.

We must involve key players in the creation of the draft Project Charter, the Project Plan, the Risk Plan and the Stakeholder Plan. We must send copies of all of these documents (once they have been signed off) to all the key players as well as the fringe players.

A useful document to create during the planning process is the Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RAM, sometimes called RACI for its depiction of Responsible, Accountable, Consult and Inform players against each task). This document will identify people beyond the direct resources assigned to each task, and can be a valuable tool in dealing with Law Number 3. It reminds the fringe players that they really do have a part to play in specific tasks.

So, we are going to involve as many people as possible in the creation of the project documents, and we are going to send copies of the documents to the world and his brother, and then what? It is very dangerous to assume that anyone will read these documents, and work out that in three weeks time they have to carry out a key task in your project.

Once the project starts we must use some sort of reminder system (the PMI refer to the Task Authorisation System) to help us and the team members remember what has to be started.

It is worth having a brief conversation with each team member at the start of the project. One of the key questions to ask is 'Are you the sort of person who likes to

look after themselves? If I send you a copy of the plan can you manage your own diary, and start tasks on time, or do you want me to remind when tasks are due?’

Give the team members the benefit of the doubt. If they opt for looking after themselves then let them do it. Of course, if they make a mess of it you can always put them of the reminder system.

I know that some PC-based planning tools will send out reminders to resources just before a task is due to start. I would not do this, as it is too passive. My full reminder system relies on speaking to the person (preferably face-to-face, but over the phone is acceptable) and listening very carefully to the replies.

If I phone someone to remind them I might soften the moment by asking if there is anything I can send them, and extra information they need to start the task. I will also ask them about their other commitments, just in case their own boss has changed their daily priorities and scuppered my project. In both cases I’m listening to their voice when they reply, listening for stress, confusion and so on.

I need to know as soon as possible if there may be a problem starting a task. This drives the timing of my phone call. I would do it 7 days in advance, just as a helpful ‘is there anything I can do...’ and then maybe repeat it 2 days before start date, just in case they have been thinking about the task and have any questions.

Of course you might think that I am pestering them, but I can make it sound like I am concerned about the tasks (I really am concerned). The alternative is to leave it to chance that they will remember to start the task on time. The plan may have been drawn up weeks or even months ago, so the chances of them remembering are slight.

And then, just what is it that you want them to do? Do you want them to be busy, or effective? Obviously we would all hope for effective team members, but how can we bring this about?

We can follow the principle implemented successfully by companies that use a lot of home workers. If we focus on output (deliverables, products, whatever your jargon calls it) then we can measure what people produce as well as the quality of it. If we focus on inputs (‘I must keep the team members busy’) then we lose sight of the whole point of the project, which is to produce something new.

Again, if we make it obvious to people that we really are interested in what they produce then they will feel that their involvement is worthwhile.

So, the successful project manager must be proactive blah, blah, blah, but I feel that the last word goes to JRR Tolkien, in *The Hobbit*, when he says ‘It is the job that is never started that takes the longest to finish’.