

Risky Business

Question:

Samoht, I am the project manager for a new project that is very important to my company. My project team and I have identified a few high-level risks, and if they occur, the project would be seriously threatened. How would you recommend that I handle these risks?

Ingrid

Answer:

Ingrid,

That's a great question, and I can definitely relate. During one of the first projects I managed we had a high-level risk hanging over us every week – the risk that my assistant would forget to pick up the donuts for “Donut Fridays.” I don't need to tell you that when people are expecting donuts and get no donuts, the results are disastrous. My assistant forgot the donuts twice during what was supposed to be a three-month project, and we ended up missing our deadline by six months.

I learned a lot from that project that I have applied to future projects, and now I am happy to pass that knowledge along to you. There are five methods for dealing with high-level risks on your project:

- **Leave it.** In this approach, the project manager looks at a high risk and decides to do nothing. This is a great option if dealing with the risk would require a lot of additional work for you. For example, during another project I managed, my assistant was in charge of bringing the pizza for “Pizza Wednesdays.” As in the previously mentioned project, there was a high risk that my assistant would forget to order the pizzas. I could have ordered the pizza myself to make sure that the task was done, but that would have required way too much work on my part. Instead, I chose to leave it and hope for the best!
- **Monitor the risk.** This approach is very similar to the “leave it” technique, but it has one key difference – you act like you are doing something about the risk. For example, let's say you are unfortunate enough to have an engaged project sponsor who periodically checks in to see how the project is going. When he asks you about the status of the high-level risk, you say you are “monitoring” it. Of course, you don't actually have to monitor it. This is a great technique to keep everyone off your back!
- **Avoid the risk.** Avoiding the risk means that the condition that is causing the problem is eliminated. This is another good technique to try when you have an engaged sponsor who is asking around and causing problems for you. When you know the sponsor is going to come around asking about the risk, just avoid him! Don't answer his phone calls, run into the bathroom if you pass him coming down the hall, hide under your desk if he knocks on your office door – you get the idea!
- **Move the risk.** In some instances, the responsibility for managing a risk can be removed from the project by assigning the risk to another entity or third party. This technique should very rarely be necessary because if you did a good job of putting together your Project Charter, you should have already rid yourself and your team of

as much responsibility as possible. However, if you find that you missed a chance to unload the responsibility for a high-level risk, by all means do it!

- **Mitigate the risk.** Mitigating the risk means that you put in place a set of proactive steps to ensure that the risk does not occur. This is the last resort since it requires you to actually do some work. You have to identify the impact, create a risk plan, assign work to team members, blah, blah, blah. I get tired and bored just talking about it.

If you stick to one of the first four techniques on this list, your project is sure to succeed! Or you'll at least have a 50/50 shot, which are better odds than you get at Las Vegas.