

Downsize your Project Team with Kickoff Meetings

Question:

We normally are assigned projects and jump right in and start working on them. However, a consultant came in the other day and talked to us about a formal kickoff meeting. Do you use this technique? How effective is it for your project team?

Simon

Answer:

Simon,

Your name is a little humorous to me. In my country the name “Simon” comes from the word “simple man”. I guess you would call this a “simpleton”. We just refer to you as a dummy. In other words we would say “Nice question Simon” which translates to “Nice question dummy”. Anyway, that is what we would say in my country, but you are not from my country. So, welcome to you Simion.

We have a similar kickoff meeting for projects in my country. However, I am not sure that it has the same purpose. You Americans take simple terms and change the meaning so I am not always sure all words are the same. In my country, a kickoff meeting is one where we kick a team member off the project. It is well known and very formal. We even have a standard agenda for this meeting to make sure that all happens according to tradition. Here is how it works.

- First, the meeting is called for all team members. We say it is a kickoff meeting and then the attendees know right away that someone will get kicked off the team. Usually everyone hopes that they are the ones leaving.
- The meeting starts with a description of the project and an update on the status, issues, risks, etc. The project manager looks to blame one person for most of the mess.
- We then look at the soft-side of the project. This includes a discussion of whom we like and who we do not like. We comment on how good the donuts are that each person brings in on Fridays, and perhaps personal hygiene. Depending on the nature of the project team there may also be a discussion of family members, parents and other personal matters that we consider to be part of a soft-skills discussion.
- In the course of this meeting the team members start to get a sense for the direction the discussion is going. For instance, if one team member is picked out for bad body odor, bad breath and an ugly mother, he can be pretty sure he is on the chopping board.
- Usually about half-way through the meeting, the manager then states that someone needs to be cut from the team. The manager asks the team members to choose a candidate.

- By this time, the team members should have guessed the sad-sack that will be eliminated. The team takes a vote and in almost every case the team picks the right guy. (If they do not, then the manager has more work to do to throw more dirt and then re-vote.)
- The manager then announces that the team has decided to kick a person off the team.
- Pleasantries are then exchanged with the loose screw, and the person is then told to leave. There is some intrigue about whether the person is kicked off the team and onto another project, or if the person is also fired. If the person is fired, he is immediately walked out the door and kicked in the rear on his way out the door.
- The meeting is adjourned.

Do you see the great value of this meeting? One big advantage is that the team votes to kick off the condemned man and this makes it easier on the manager. It turns into a team decision. The other benefit is that the remaining team members feel good to still have a job and this morale boost can last anywhere from one hour to a couple days before everyone is deflated again.

It is interesting that you ask me about the Kickoff meeting. I thought that this was just a tradition in my country. It sounds like it is a tradition in your country as well.

Work hard and take a bath my friend.