Lights, Camera, Action!
Get your workforce in motion with these four strategies.

BY JOE WYNNE

Does the latest installment from *As the Project Turns* seem familiar? Just think of the headaches that workforce management issues give you during an active project. Solving problems caused by bad communications or departmental selfishness can give your aspirin bottle a real workout. What’s worse, it may be difficult to see how you will ever be able to turn things around and become more proactive.

What a workforce needs to avoid chronic (and all-to-common) difficulties like these is a certain type of energy. It’s the energy that comes from having the confidence that a project has been properly planned. It comes from the optimism of workers who are prepared to collaborate and empowered with the authority to meet realistic expectations.

To your rescue is gantthead’s Activation Stage (the third stage in our JPACE process), bridging the gap between approval of the project plan and the start of development/implementation. This includes gathering resources, publicizing the project and training the team. These tasks are often shortened or even left out altogether if not treated as a single unit, and when they do not get the attention they deserve, the consequences are dire.

The four strategies outlined here will build the positive energy that your team needs to succeed.

1. **DEFINE ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES EARLY**

For high-voltage activation, use the organizational chart you developed in the Planning Stage to describe which project roles complete which tasks. Project roles should be customized to include assignment of responsibility for specific systems, subsystems, key metrics or other areas that are critical to the success of the project at large.

In addition to project roles, there are some consistent responsibilities that should be communicated to all workers. For example, emphasize the importance of:

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**AS THE PROJECT TURNS...**

**ACT I**

Trustworthy team leader Dirk enters the project manager’s office, responding to a request for a deliverable. “I thought Summer was going to do that. It wasn’t on the plan, and half of my staff was laid off last week!” Dirk looked confused and defensive. Something he had put on the back burner had boiled over and ruined the whole project. Roman, the rugged but dogged project manager, wondered, “What do I have to do to keep this from happening?”
Meeting deadlines for deliverables and reports
Following policies and procedures
Listing issues and aggressively resolving them according to the escalation procedure
Continuously checking for feedback from interdependent project teams

Have this information ready for the kick-off meeting. Every detail does not have to be in the hand of every worker, but all members of the workforce should have confidence that responsibilities are clear.

2 DEFINE PROJECT VALUES & PRIORITIES EARLY

Your project values and priorities help you manage the “white space” in the organization chart, that major source of friction and fires. Insulate the workforce from problems here with clear project values.

One way to create a project value statement is simply to use the values provided by your company. This gives you some clout from the executive level. But don’t just simply restate those values; connect them to your project by adding two or three relevant project examples for each corporate value.

Here are some examples of how the connections might be made in a project document:

**Typical Corporate Value:**
Mutual Respect Among All Employees
**Related Project Example:**
Work together professionally and politely when solving problems or resolving issues between departments or teams.

**Typical Corporate Value:**
Collaboration
**Related Project Example:**
Anticipate all current needs of internal customers as deliverables are completed. Minimum standards for deliverables are only a starting point.

You may want to specify priority tasks, such as “resolving issues that interfere with meeting deadlines.”

Lessons learned from previous projects will help you identify project examples, all the more powerful if they go against the grain of any destructive tendencies of the existing corporate culture. Even better, let the workers themselves build part of this values statement.

Clarifying roles, responsibilities, values and priorities builds a foundation for workforce confidence and optimism.

3 PREPARE FOR A POWERFUL KICK-OFF MEETING

A little preparation can make your kick-off meeting far more effective. The tasks listed here can be completed after you have set your schedule for the actual meeting, but don’t cut it too close. The meeting date might sneak up on you and the tasks can get difficult to complete unless started quickly. Remember that stakeholders are involved.

GET STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Build a powerful kick-off meeting by getting sponsors and stakeholders involved. Corporate culture or high-prestige individuals can set up obstacles to optimal workforce performance. To counter this tendency in a proactive way, review your plan with the stakeholders, get their agreement on expectations and their participation in the kick-off meeting. Work with their schedules so that you can leverage their influence.
CREATE AN ELECTRIFYING AGENDA
The kick-off meeting is your once-in-a-project chance to set the tone and create a positive work culture that will flow through the entire project. Bumbling this opportunity will leave you playing catch-up in a race that you cannot win, so if you are concerned that your presentations resemble Alan Greenspan’s, here are some tips:

• Don’t put participants to sleep with long presentations of routine information. Instead, jolt them with high-level updates connected to business strategy.

• Don’t waste time with happy-but-hollow (and sometimes embarrassing) team building. Conduct one or two powerful activities that confirm project values, create rapport between the participants and build confidence in their ability to work effectively together.

• Link the project to business success immediately. Workers need to believe that their project is important to the success of the business. Use the sponsor and stakeholders to describe the link between success of the project and success of the business.

SELECT APPROPRIATE MEDIA
The default kick-off meeting strategy is to have everyone attend a single event in the same room. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, so choose special media based on the circumstances. Consider teleconferences, Internet-based meetings, satellite-based conferencing and other means with the activation objectives in mind. Sometimes two or more meetings that in total bring together every employee in some type of face-to-face context may be most appropriate (as long as stakeholders can be involved).

4 KICK-OFF EFFECTIVELY
This is the Big Event in project activation, where your job as leader is to build energy by instilling confidence and create optimism. Motivate participants by presenting the agenda items with polish and professional flair. This is very much a sales presentation.

REINFORCE PROJECT VALUES AND BUILD RAPPORT
It is critical to have some type of energizing activity that serves as an icebreaker but also allows you to reinforce project values. (See “Pass the Icepick, Please…” on page 13 for a little help.)

To instill confidence, have team members who are responsible for metrics near and dear to the hearts of stakeholders introduce themselves and express their commitment to successful completion of their part of the project. Once that commitment is clear, there’s little chance of coming up short on it. Nothing motivates like a public declaration of goals.

REQUEST PARTICIPANT INPUT
Individual team members often feel that they have little or no influence on the success of the project. This attitude certainly short-circuits your ability to maintain optimism and confidence. Workers need to believe they are important to the success of the project.

By asking for their advice and ideas immediately, you can create a positive success culture in your

[center stage]
Pass the Icepick, Please...

Icebreakers are nice and necessary, but few build energy in a group while reinforcing project values. Try a variation of this technique during your next kick-off meeting to utilize the power of positive competition among groups in your project workforce.

The only input is a sheet or card summarizing project values—such as collaboration, mutual respect, sharing information, etc.

1. **Have workgroups meet each other during a 15-minute or longer session.** Provide them with a summary of project values and/or corporate values. Two of the values should be highlighted on each sheet. All sheets should have two different values highlighted where possible to avoid duplication of responses.

2. **When participants introduce themselves to the group, each member will relate an anecdote** on how they have followed one of the values in the past. This safely builds up the confidence and optimism of the entire team.

3. **Then the group adds its own project-specific examples of the values on the sheet.** If time is limited, then only do this for the two highlighted values.

4. **Here’s the fun part. The workgroups should be told that, at the end of the session, they will be asked to make a statement showing how they will be exemplars of one of the highlighted values on their cards,** followed by an example of how they will do that. These answers can be a little “over the top,” but not sarcastic or critical of other groups. An example or two should be provided on the sheet. For example, a spokesperson from the group will stand up and say:
   - “The programming team members will inspire the entire project with our ability to collaborate effectively. We will keep in mind all stakeholders and work continuously for positive outcomes for all.”
   - “We analysts will be a beacon of excellence in project communications. We have the experience to go beyond the minimum expectations to meet the needs of all involved in a timely fashion.”

5. **Have the entire room vote informally (e.g., by applause) for the best response.** Give out a silly gift to the winner with much fanfare.
   The final result of these few minutes is that workers have introduced themselves, built up confidence in their ability to succeed at the project, reinforced values within themselves and set themselves a performance bar for which any project manager would be jealous.

—J.W.

project with the kick-off meeting, even if the surrounding culture is toxic.

First, have workers develop their own list of project-specific connections to the corporate values. Second, ask workers to provide you with their expectations for working in the project. Tell them in advance that you are going to do this, put it on the agenda, then write down what they say on a flip chart or other device. Do not judge the comments—try not to even comment on them. Just write them down in the words of the speaker and say a word of thanks. Wear your thick skin.

**DOCUMENT TO REINFORCE**

Once the meeting is over, send a summary out as a deliverable. Include descriptions of the stakeholder segments and the project values. Add any specific expectations, examples, questions and comments from participants. Remember, you want to show that these are valued in your project. If an answer to a question had to be nailed down after the meeting, add it to the meeting summary.

Give that aspirin bottle a rest. By activating the workforce using these high-voltage strategies, you will furnish the project with a cultural infrastructure insulated from those chronic impediments to workforce performance.

**EPILOGUE**

Roman left on time for the third day this week, able to meet with his love for the past few months, Becca. His ability to instill project ownership into his workforce had drastically reduced the number of project fires he has had to fight. The workers were happier, too. When Becca tells him she has just found out she is his mother, the shock will not affect the customer.

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