Rescuing a Captive Project

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"You're kidding!"

It was Emma's first day on the project and Fabio, the project manager, had just told her, "Management has made it absolutely clear that my top priority is to make Tom happy. We have to walk on eggshells or he'll quit."

Emma was impatient. "So let him quit. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that Tom knows everything about what we're building, and it's all in his head. If he walks, we're in even worse trouble than now!"

The project was in deep trouble already. Fabio and Emma were the rescue team, parachuted in to replace a more junior project manager and test manager. Bill, the former project manager, had been demoted to technical lead, and the test manager had been fired. Tom, the lead architect, was the only survivor from the original project leadership team.

Emma soon realized that Tom was the project's biggest problem. Although he had a team of two senior people, he kept all critical information about the requirements and design to himself, doling it out to programmers and testers only as individual components were built. His architects, Amanda and Peter, could only run along behind, catching crumbs of information and struggling to contribute.

The application was half built, and the project had already run two months over its projected six. Only the changes in leadership had kept it alive. But though expected to fix the project, Fabio, Emma, and Bill were handcuffed by their manager's orders to humor Tom—orders that prevented them from doing everything needed to refocus all the project's resources for optimal effectiveness.

Worse, as the person upon whom everything depended, Tom was stressed out. He reacted by blaming everyone but himself for the project's problems. According to Tom, the programmers and testers were incompetent. He shared his contempt with the team constantly, and most people felt helpless to fight back. He publicly praised his architects and privately abused them. The whole project team knew that resisting Tom brought vindictive retaliation. In this toxic atmosphere, morale was dismal, and the application quality was equally low, reflecting the team's misery and the counter-productive processes.

The project was Tom's hostage—and management had let it happen.

How The Project Ended

The project limped agonizingly along and finally delivered a buggy application to the business a year late. Poor quality was the primary cause of the schedule overrun. The programmers in particular had not understood requirements. There were long delays as testers found critical problems and programmers tried to fix them, queuing for Tom's time as the sole arbiter for requirements and design.

Management decreed overtime to appease the business sponsor. The whole team worked many successive six-day weeks, and the programmers were forced to work even more.

As project manager, then as technical lead, Bill had been beaten down too often. He did little to shield his programmers or help them get essential information. Programmer morale continued to decline, and team members were frequently ill. Management eventually fired Bill and replaced him with a stronger technical lead—too late for most of the programmers. Three resigned mid-project, and the remaining six followed at project end.

Amanda and Peter both quit long before the end. Each had requested transfer to another project. Neither could tolerate management's lack of support and refusal to move them, and the company lost their valuable skills.

Only the test team survived essentially intact. Coming into an already troubled project, Emma managed to keep a relatively clear perspective. She encouraged her testers to hound Tom for information and defended them from his verbal assaults. Emboldened by support and their own increasing expert status, the testers grew stronger. Eventually, with agreement from Fabio and the new technical lead, Emma paired her testers with programmers to complete the application.

Senior management never addressed the Tom problem, though they directed him to document the requirements as acceptance criteria for business sponsor agreement. He completed the document too late to help the project, but it was instrumental in securing business acceptance of the application.

The sad conclusion: a bug-ridden application, loss of many valuable company resources, and unhappiness for the remaining people.

If management had supported Fabio and his team leaders in addressing the hostage situation instead of capitulating to it, the conclusion could have been much more positive.

How It Could Have Ended

Fabio called a team leaders' planning session. To everyone's surprise, Amanda turned up in Tom's place.

Fabio announced, "Tom is on leave for a week. He won't be returning to this project. Amanda has agreed to take on the architecture lead role. She'll need help. Tom's absence is going to leave us with a big knowledge gap, and we have to develop a plan to fill it."

Emma asked, "Will we have access to Tom when he comes back from leave?"

"We can arrange some limited access, but Tom is moving to a new project. In no time, he'll be too busy for us."

Fabio continued, "Let's start by identifying all the big things that only Tom knows. We probably won't get them all, but we should know the really critical ones."

They brainstormed a list. Most items were requirements-related, with a few associated with the design. Luckily, the fundamental components were already in progress, but some details existed only in Tom's head.

Next, they explored solutions. They agreed it was essential to share requirements knowledge across the project, and that the acceptance criteria management had pressured Tom to document would be a good vehicle. They planned a five-day effort during which Amanda, assisted by Peter, would lead intensive sessions with Tom plus a cross-functional team consisting of the tester and programmer responsible for each functional area.

The remaining big gap was Tom's working relationship with Rebecca, the project's business sponsor. Though Tom had alienated the project team, he had carefully cultivated Rebecca's trust. Fabio had Rebecca's attention for project progress and status, but she routinely took concerns about the application to Tom. Tom's removal could cause the business to lose confidence in the project.

Amanda suggested scheduling time with Rebecca and her new requirements team to review the acceptance criteria, once developed. Along with the obvious benefits of sponsor review, this would help build new relationships and assure Rebecca that the team remained strong.

Fabio and his team began executing their plan. At first, it wasn't easy for Amanda and her cross-functional team to extract knowledge from Tom. But the week's enforced break had changed his attitude. When the initial shock and anger faded, he realized he no longer felt overwhelmed. Relieved, Tom began to feel eager for a new project challenge and strove to cooperate.

Did everything go smoothly from there? Of course not. The project was still late and over budget. Team members still had to grapple with existing quality problems, and they lost time falling into unexpected holes left by Tom's departure. But the atmosphere was no longer toxic, and morale steadily improved. Having shared knowledge across the project, the team members were in a much better position to work efficiently. They learned to trust each other and work together to solve the inevitable problems as they arose.

Best of all, they finished with a solid application that the business was pleased to put into production.

Story Lines

- Never allow individuals to hold projects hostage to their expertise or knowledge.

- If a hostage situation does occur, remove the problem resource.

- Contact the customer immediately after the hostage taker has been removed.

- Totally commit skilled people and resources to work through the transition issues.

- Recognize that removal of a key resource may slow a project down at first, but overall a well-managed team will recover and produce a better result.

Questions

Have you ever worked on a project taken hostage by one individual? Could the situation have been improved by removal of the person?