

How to Deal with (and prevent) Project Fatigue

by Katie, May 2009

In a recent project management meeting, each staff member cited a weakness they'd like to improve. Several answers related to challenges with those few projects that tend to go far over schedule and how to get it back on track, within budget, and keep morale high (for both us and the client) long after the project kickoff.

With a few of these kinds of projects under my belt now, I've learned a couple ways to both prevent and work through these phases. In a recent project management meeting, each staff member cited a weakness they'd like to improve. Several answers related to challenges with those few projects that tend to go far over schedule and how to get it back on track, within budget, and keep morale high (for both us and the client) long after the project kickoff.

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Talk about Commitments in terms of Hours

Most clients (including myself early on) viewed the project in terms of # of meetings or # of weeks, but not as an hourly commitment per week. They book out the time for the meetings and assume all decisions will work themselves out during that timeframe, however this is typically not the case. We try to guide the decision process during the calls as much as possible, but any major decision will require some independent thought and internal review. Reserving at least the same amount of time per week that's allocated for meetings for your own personal schedule is a good rule, but many clients require more than this.

Table 'Offline' Topics During Meetings

Determining what is an 'offline' topic during a meeting can be ambiguous at times, but as soon as I sense a discussion that could benefit from some reflection time off the call on either side, I suggest tabling it and regrouping with a decision at the next meeting. This helps to protect the finite meeting time and keeps the overall schedule on track. It also sends a message to everyone that our meeting time is not an infinite resource. It's for productive discussions and better yet, decisions!

Choose a Single Dedicated Authority for each Party

The smoothest run projects have a clearly defined leader through whom all key decisions are made. We used to think that limiting the number of participants in meetings was key but I've grown to see that as long as it's clear who's driving it all works out--others can suggest where we go, but ultimately one person steers. Beware of proceeding with meetings with a stand-in team member. The team lead role was likely given to that individual because they have insights and authority others don't. If they step out of the project temporarily and let others cover, chances are you'll end up backpedaling on a decision and void whatever efficiencies were gained. If you find a project in this position, it's best to have a discussion about how to adjust the schedule to work for the key team leaders rather than throwing more resources on the project.

Post Schedule Early and Send Reminders Often

At the beginning of a project, I send an email with a detailed overview of the entire project timeline with descriptions of each phase. Having this aerial view from the beginning is key, but after about a week, it tends to be ignored. Email AND verbal reminders just about schedule are just as critical as this kickoff email. When we're approaching a milestone, I remind everyone on the call or send out email updates. If we miss a deadline, I send out a revised schedule as soon as possible that displays how that impacts the overall schedule.

Agenda and "Homework" Item Emails

If there is a single habit a Project Manager can form to predict success in a project is to send out agenda items before every meeting, and notes/homework items afterward. By the end of a meeting, chances are you've lost the focus of the entire group. They're thinking about what's next in their agenda that day. The post meeting email leaves no ambiguity about what was decided, and what needs to happen before the next call.

This practice can work wonders for those projects stuck in a rut. Much like the advice a cross country coach gave me, it 'chunks down' the race into parts that you can envision accomplishing. It gives the group a sense that the Project Manager always knows where the next step lies ahead.

Call a spade a spade.

If despite everyone's best attempts, the project continues to lag, then it's time to have a separate conversation about schedule alone. Understandably, these calls can have an ominous feeling going into them but I've never once had a call like this where everyone did not leave the call noticeably happier. It's a miserable feeling to be part of project that just can't get off the ground.

For meetings like these, we always try to have both hard data about hours spent, budget remaining AND a number of potential solutions to talk through. This keeps the conversation grounded in hard facts and the variety of solutions gives everyone a sense of control about how to get out of the situation.