The Wisdom of Grapevines

By Pedro C Ribeiro, PMP
(© Copyright 2008, Pedro C. Ribeiro, PMP)

In many projects that fail there is evidence in advance that the project is headed for trouble. However sometimes this evidence is ignored, even when project team members try to warn the organization. Critical warnings bypass or are minimized, flying under the most sophisticated risk radars. Organizations end up not recognizing the early signs of failure until it is too late.

Project Trouble: Nobody Saw It Coming?

Projects may run into trouble for many reasons. The underlying causes of project trouble may range from unrealistic project objectives, scope not well defined, to lack of appropriate resources and executive support, just to mention a few.

However, independently of why a particular project failed to meet its objectives, we should ask ourselves one key question: Was the project trouble a total surprise for the organization? That is, all project participants were simultaneously surprised by a floundering project? Take a minute to think about this question. The good news is that, in most cases, it was not a surprise. Probably someone in the organization knew it, may be well in advance, or some project team members knew it and tried to warn the organization. What may look as a surprise in many troubled projects, sometimes, are in fact ignored early warnings. According to research a large proportion of employees know far in advance when projects are doomed, but feel incapable of, or unwilling to speak up. This is due to many factors including company culture, pressure for results and attitudes towards risk. Denial, failure or refusal to see early warning signs of project trouble creates project risk blind spots, and the anxiety of the project team will end up flowing through the grapevine, or the organization's informal communication network. The strength of the informal network will vary according to factors such as company and country culture.

Setting the Grapevine in Motion

According to research, grapevine activity accelerates anytime there is an ambiguous or uncertain situation, or when there are no sanctioned and trusted channels for venting concerns, and studies indicate that between 75 percent and 95 percent of grapevine information is correct. Therefore, if your risk management process does not provide the appropriate forum for listening to your team risk concerns, project risk identification will be done through the grapevine, probably in the cafeteria, by the water cooler or after normal office hours. Remember that employees in any organization receive most of their information from informal networks and from a small number of people whose opinions are highly sought and respected, and with the evolution of internet, the grapevine is traveling faster than ever jumping over organization and geographical boundaries.

If your project is setting in motion rumor mills on the grapevine, and the *real* project risk identification is happening only outside your regular project risk reviews, beware. May be it is time for you to have a hard look at your risk management process. The source of early warning signs of project trouble may be closer to you than you think, and by ignoring it you may be developing dangerous project risk blind spots that are detrimental to project teamwork and commitment.

Pedro C Ribeiro, PMP is Director of Region V (Americas South) of the PMI RISK SIG, and founder of Stratech/TheProjectOffice.