

MANAGING

How many times have you been a member of a team assigned to a project and have labored hard only to find, in the end, that the project fails? The reason for failure could be a set of intangible and ineluctable mental attitudes, which can adversely affect a manager's task. Here is an appreciation of the problem and ways to eliminate these phantoms of the mind.

By James J. Collins

How many managers have you witnessed during your career who encountered a program or project, which resulted in their termination? No matter how much time or effort they employed, it seemed that the goals were not attainable and even the effort was looked upon as a failure. Their careers were often impacted severely, if not on a long-term basis, at least on a short-term basis.

The next time, you may be assigned one of these impossible jobs. Every manager will, at one time or another in his career, come across a set of conditions where he is assigned a task that seems impossible to accomplish.

Often, he is brought in to take over a program that has defeated previous managers. When he first examines the task and the people assigned, he uncovers a number of recurrent themes. The people involved have myriad reasons and seemingly valid excuses for why the task has dragged on or cannot be accomplished. Many managers run into these road blocks and are stopped because they believe the excuses presented to them and start trying to solve them. In many cases, these managers fail.

Peter Drucker in his book on management identifies jobs that are "widow makers." These are the jobs which "manage to defeat one good man after the other without any clear reason why. These jobs seem to be logical, seem to be well constructed, seem to be doable—yet nobody seems to be able to do them."

He indicates that, in many cases, the job is too large for the people to accomplish. I agree with this, but, in my experience, many of these failures are due to the fact that managers have not been trained to handle problems that are non-visible entities—not tangible, and yet every job has a certain number of these. These are the problems that reside in men's minds and have no substance—Phantoms. These phan-

toms consist of attitudes, preconceived opinions, emotions, habits, and most ephemeral of all, morale.

This article identifies some of these mechanisms and outlines a series of analyses and ground rules that can be employed to flush out these phantoms.

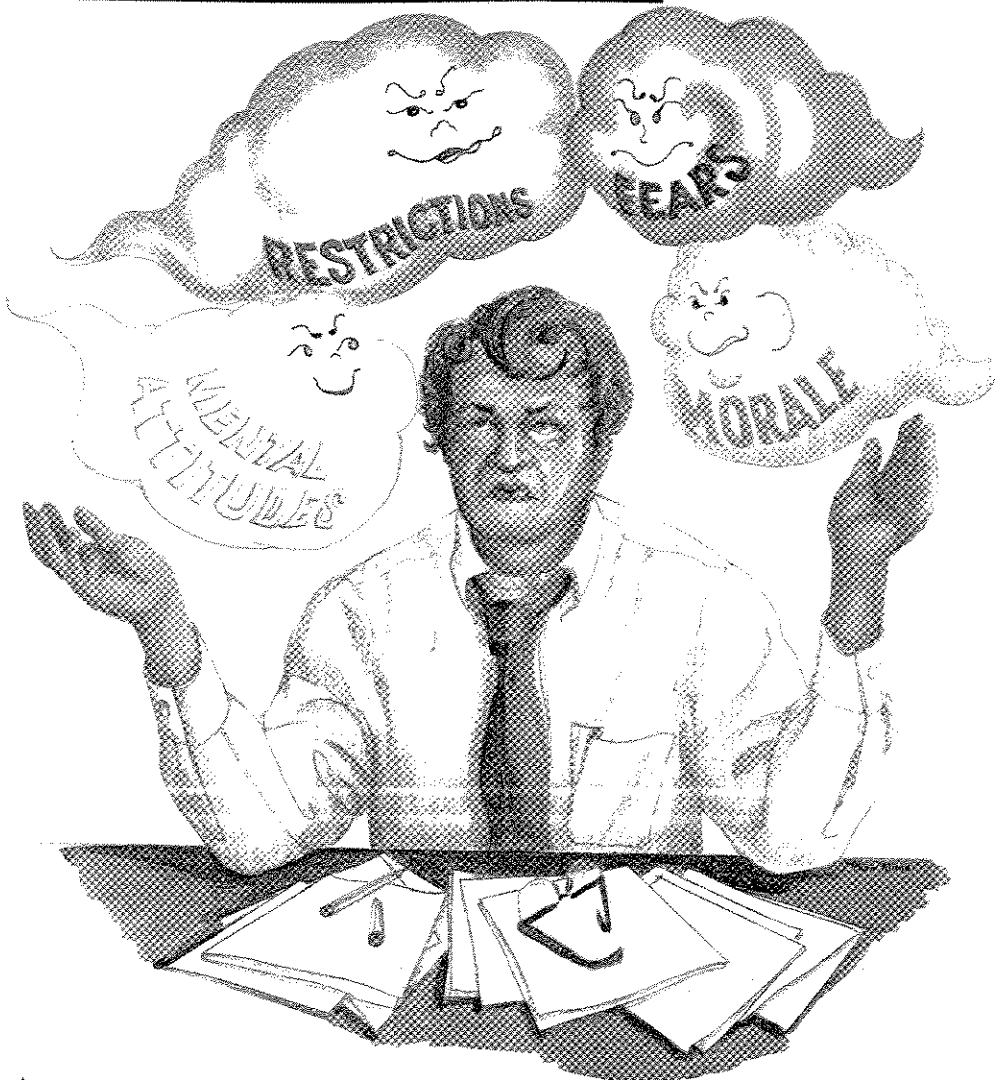
Many a manager's subordinates have preconceived notions of what they can or cannot do or what the priorities are regardless of the facts at hand. When opportunities are presented to them, they totally ignore them because they must "follow the plan." This slavish dedication to a plan without the flexibility of responding to a major opportunity has often converted a success into a disaster.

The entrepreneur. On the opposite side of the coin are those successes influenced by positive preconceived notions. American industry is constantly pointing to the entrepreneur, amazed at the ability of this interloper to take a new concept, pursue it, open new vistas, and come up with prospects that generate significant business opportunities.

These are people who have vision, who believe that something can be done, and who have no mental deterrent. They believe the job can be accomplished. They brush aside all negative inputs. As a business grows, these people are often displaced by those who are used to building large, impressive, effective manufacturing machines.

Unfortunately, these latter managers are more inclined to "follow the procedures." They are often reluctant to take risks or shortcuts or to step outside of the rules and regulations. They are effective in their own areas of expertise, but in a rapidly changing environment, they become defensive and immobile. They would rather live with the existing system than change and take a chance.

PHANTOMS



A manager is primarily involved in handling people and assigning them to various tasks. He must recognize that the people he works with have their own barriers, constraints, restrictions, and fears. These are their "bogey men." He must understand that each of these people has invisible limitations already set in their minds. These restraints control every decision they make and influence their success or failure. He must manage these phantoms as well as managing the people themselves.

To be able to manage these phantoms, the manager must first detect them and bring them out in the open. Then he can examine them, evaluate them, and figure out the best way to destroy them or reduce their influence. Only in this way will he be truly able to manage his people and get his assignment completed. The

first phantom he must approach is the morale of the group.

Group morale. The manager must be sensitive to the mental predisposition of his group; they need to develop a "can do" attitude to succeed. If the members have been associated with a losing or disastrous project, their self-esteem, morale, and ability to function has probably been severely undermined.

The manager must repair or replace the most damaged personnel before he can expect any significant improvement or progress. One way to generate a winning scenario is to make these people in their own minds view themselves and their team as capable, self-assured winners.

During the investigation and planning stage, one proven approach is to involve every member of the team, and segment the initial tasks into separate activities. Then give each member of the team small, doable elements, which can be completed in a short time frame, mea-

James J. Collins is Director of Avionics Engineering, Kolesman Instrument Co., Merrimack, N.H., a division of Sun Chemical Corp.

sured in days. Review each assignment in front of the team and let each individual report on his or her assignment.

If, during this process, you come across an individual who indicates that a particular task has no chance of success, do not give that task to that person, because the result will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a senior subordinate has that attitude, replace him immediately. Do not let him stay with the group, because his attitude will undermine everything you are trying to accomplish.

Meeting goals. Another manifestation of a limiting mental attitude is a goal that is not attainable. This can be seen in athletic events, where a particular record is a barrier that no one has been able to break.

In the '50s, it was the 4-min mile that Bannister eventually broke. Soon after, a number of other runners were able to break through the barrier that had been a resistance point. Often, these barriers are, in reality, mental roadblocks.

They exist in the minds of the personnel involved and act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The inability to meet goals is sometimes caused by attitudes or habits on the part of the person charged with the task. A manager should determine whether or not the problem is tangible as presented to him or whether it is symptomatic of an attitude or habit on the part of the person assigned the task. For example, one problem encountered is the person who is always late with assignments. Sometimes, this can be attributed to a personality characteristic. One such person is a perfectionist.

A perfectionist will never completely accomplish a task. They is always something more than can be done, something more that can be added, something that can be done a little bit better, or a little neater. A perfectionist will never let go, and, as a result, the task is never completed.

These negative performance elements must be identified and action taken. Don't let a perfectionist lead a group; he will undermine his subordinates and cause havoc to your schedule. Place him in an individual contribution role, where perfection is an attribute rather than a deficit.

Mental attitude. Another intangible problem related to attitude is the reluctance of people to confront a problem, a group of people, or a particular manager that they fear. In many cases, the responsible person will defer making a decision, making a contact, or having a meeting to resolve a difficulty.

This response occurs because they are mentally frightened of the meeting or of the results of the meeting. As a defensive posture, they often work around the problem rather than facing it head on. If this is encountered, you have to assess the assertiveness of the person given that particular job. If he is very timid, politically overly cautious, or possesses a limited amount of self-confidence, you should not

place him in a position where he must make gutsy decisions or where he must confront formidable opponents.

The manager must evaluate all the jobs and assess the ability of each person charted with that particular task to perform. The most important thing is to assess each person's mental toughness, his ability to go through "bogey men in his mind," and get a task completed.

When a festering problem has been assigned to you, as a new manager, you should go slowly and carefully examine all the aspects of the task. It is my experience that, if a large number of competent people have been working on a difficult problem for a long time and have had no measurable success, they are probably working on the wrong solution.

A proven solution is to bring each person involved in the problem into your office and ask them one at a time to describe the problem, describe the solution, and describe the cause of their present dilemma, asking them what needs to be performed to meet their goals. Often, you will encounter a litany of phantoms.

A task cannot be done because a particular person is not available. Or a particular piece of equipment is not working. Cooperation from department A has not been forthcoming. Data has been sent to the computer system and the results took an inordinate amount of time to come back. The problems that will be listed will be interminable.

One significant characteristic will be the tendency of the participants to point at another group, person, or department as an excuse. Take notes and record all the salient facts and allegations. If the process is pursued to its ultimate conclusion, you will individually contact each person involved directly with solving the problem and each person or group that has been identified as a blocking element.

Once all the information is acquired, the manager should review it and then schedule a meeting with all the personnel that have been interviewed. This meeting is the most illuminating.

It has been my experience that a representation of the problem and the excuses should be given to all the attendees so that they can hear what has been said to the manager. At this point, you will find a few new pieces of information as people tell you aspects of the problem, which individuals had either neglected to tell you about before or had been afraid to tell you.

In an open meeting, some members may be less tolerant of another member's failings and the manager will get a more realistic view of the situation.

The manager, at this point, has an opportunity to perform some legerdemain. He should start chronologically with the first interviews and review his comments and the problems he has identified as being caused by other members in the room. As this develops, certain of

the problems will be immediately apparent.

If there is a conflict between two groups, this will surface. If there is, indeed, a department that is not pulling its own weight, the other departments will use this opportunity to put it on the table and clear the air. This is also an opportunity for the manager to use his authority to clear phantoms from the minds of the attendees.

Most importantly, he should make a detailed list of each element that is blocking someone and preventing him from performing his task. The manager must recognize these phantoms, no matter how trivial they appear, act as justification to the person involved for not performing.

If a piece of equipment needs to be made available, it should be made available. If a department is not responding quickly, a commitment should be obtained from the department head. A priority should be given to the responding group and a mutual agreement between the groups worked out while all the other groups are in attendance acting as witnesses.

In this manner, you put the weak departments or persons fully in the spotlight—an area they tend to shun because of their inability to perform. They will go out of their way to get out of the spotlight, because it is uncomfortable. The department head will realize that he is made much more vulnerable and his weakness is being elevated in an open forum. This gathering with its full complement of personnel should be repeated three or four times.

Security blanket. After the first week, once a number of the simple items are relieved, the participants will find that their security blankets are no longer available. They will be stripped bare and out in the sunlight. They will find that they must attend to the problem because their excuses are no longer valid.

It has been my experience that, unless this full complement of phantoms is removed, you will find that an organization "digs in" and remains reluctant to move in any direction until their bogey men are removed.

Once the phantoms are removed, however, the entire organization will now be focused on the problem at hand and the participants will be aware that a confrontation may occur at the open forum. Those who are timid will go out of their way to ensure that their tasks are performed so that they are not spotlighted.

As the phantoms have been identified and eliminated, the manager now has an opportunity to truly manage the program. He should set goals at his periodic meetings, on a daily basis if the problem is big enough and requires much coordination.

An effective manager must tell a member of his staff that such and such a task needs to be performed by Friday (or whatever) at such and such a time. There is no confusion at that type of assignment.

Of course, at this point you will find people trying to get off the hook. They will tell you the 16 reasons why they can't get the job done: they don't have enough people, or they don't have the time. At this point, a good manager will not accept any of these excuses.

Most of the members will be performing at an acceptable level. He will tell the person assigned the task that it is his responsibility to get it done by the deadline. With all his peers and associates in the room, this will place him in a stressful position.

In this way, you will immediately find out who your performers are and who are the drones in your organization. Each successive meeting should bring out two or three facets of the program.

The tasks as they are assigned will probably be accomplished following the old rule of 80/20. 80% of the people will meet their goals and 20% will not. These are the weaker elements in your organization and they will have to be addressed independently. They must be forced to perform their tasks or they will have to be removed from your program area as quickly as possible. Move the drones out and move the performers into positions of authority.

It is important that written notes of all assignments be recorded and transmitted to all attendees. This acts as a written memorandum reinforcing the assignment that your staff has received and it removes the tendency of people to vacillate and prevaricate. Two to three weeks under this regimen is necessary to bring a program into a focused fast track.

Removing phantoms. This process will have several secondary effects which are long term and positive. First of all, the working relationship between the various groups will improve because they are brought into personal contact on a regular basis and given task assignments that they must perform, which are measurable and attainable.

The other members of the group will learn to work together more cohesively because they will be forced to depend on one another. In addition, their personal self-confidence will build up as they learn to accomplish tasks on a mandated basis. Meeting a difficult assignment within a reasonable period of time develops a positive attitude. Success breeds success.

The manager must always remember that the phantoms in one man's mind are as real as the desk that is concretely in front of him. It is a wall invisible to you as the manager, but real to that person, which must be overcome before they feel that they are free of its constraints.

The phantoms are mental chains that, to the person who sees them, are real and binding. A good manager must recognize this and endeavor to "break the chains," removing these bogey men from his subordinates' minds so that they can perform. Once this invisible army is defeated, the group is well on its way to success.