

# Lessons from Line Management

**PM File** by David Elam

We had worked hard to win the assignment and had worked even harder for six weeks getting ready for the field work. During a review meeting one week before the field work was to begin, I learned that the overhaul and calibration of an important test meter, a task that typically required three or four weeks, had not been completed. My boss became highly agitated, demanding to know why something that important had not been completed earlier. I explained that I had sent the meter back for overhaul and calibration over a month ago, requesting standard turnaround time. But I had not followed up to make sure the meter repair was on track. It only took a single call to the vendor who apologized for the delay, completed the work promptly, and shipped the meter in time for our project. Even though everything turned out fine, that experience changed my approach to issuing and following up on project assignments.

As project managers, we depend on others to complete tasks that are important, and in some cases, essential for project success. The people we count on may have a different set of priorities and may not be accustomed to the types of requests we make or they may be overwhelmed by similar requests from other project managers. In either case, our challenge is to make sure our assignment remains at the top of their lists.

Some project managers accomplish this objective through the equivalents of brute force and intimidation.

These project managers often achieve their goals; however, brute force and intimidation rarely foster risk-taking and creativity, potentially limiting the quality of work products to that which is safe and acceptable and, thereby, eliminating the prospects for innovation or meaningful breakthroughs.

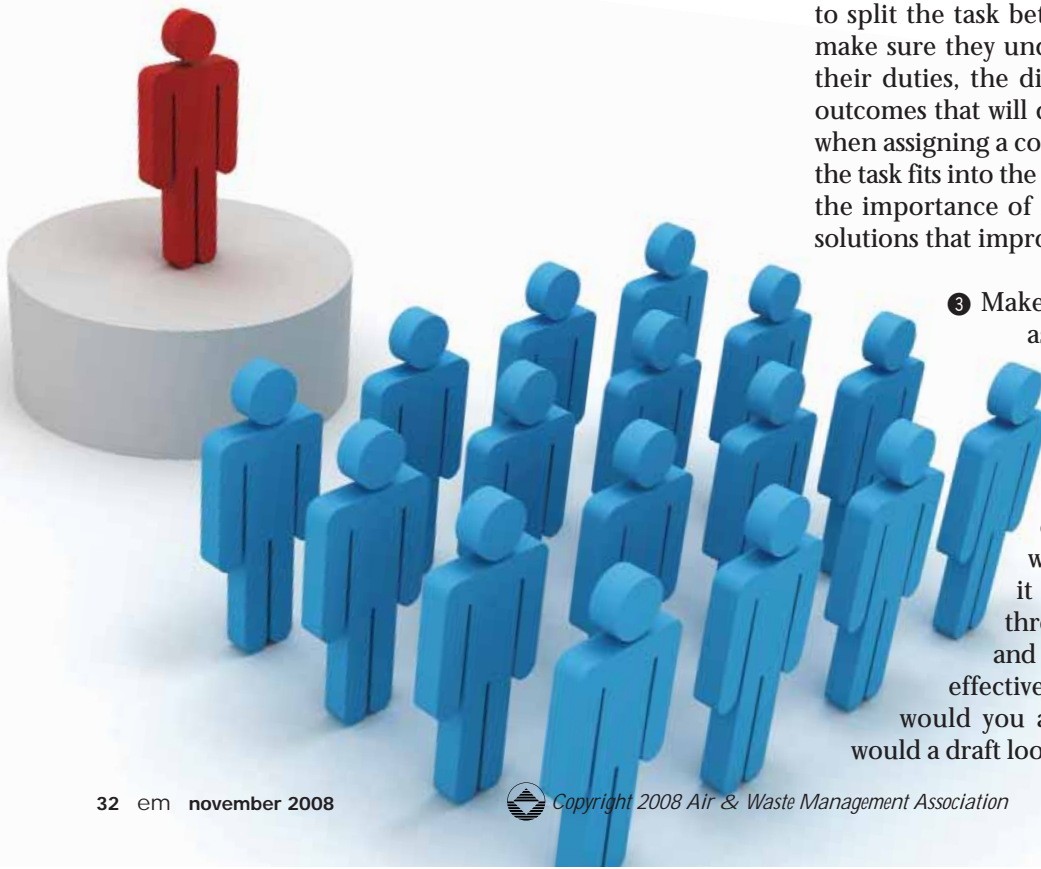
Other project managers think that they can ensure compliance with task assignments and deadlines by copying a supervisor on project requests. This is just another form of intimidation. Furthermore, it underscores the inability of the project manager to motivate others to perform project work and attempts to transfer the responsibility for monitoring assignment progress to the supervisor. Unless there is a project-related need for the supervisor to know about the assignment, this tactic wastes resources.

An alternate approach involves the application of the delegation techniques of line managers. There are thousands of references about effective delegation techniques, most of which share the below criteria.

- ① Choose the best person for the assignment. Nothing surprising about this recommendation, but it comes with conditions. The “best people” are often sought out by others, which means (1) our assignment must be challenging and interesting, (2) we need to appreciate their abilities and contribution, and (3) we should give special consideration to the following steps.
- ② Assign complete tasks when possible. If it is necessary to split the task between two individuals, we need to make sure they understand the relationship between their duties, the division of responsibilities, and the outcomes that will determine individual success. Even when assigning a complete task, briefly explaining how the task fits into the overall project helps the person see the importance of his or her role and may stimulate solutions that improve other project areas.

- ③ Make sure the person understands the assignment, budget, and schedule.

This means more than passing along the project scoping documents or work plan. We need to ensure that the person understands what is required, how much effort is appropriate, and when the work must be completed. Although it is possible to accomplish this goal through e-mail, phone conversations and face-to-face meetings are often more effective. Open-ended questions like “how would you approach this assignment,” “what would a draft look like,” “how would you handle this



problem if it develops,” “what resources do you need to accomplish the assignment,” “what conditions or events might slow progress or increase costs,” and “what’s on your schedule in coming weeks” facilitate an exchange that improves understanding, provides insights that can be useful in other project areas, and builds respect and commitment.

- 4 Track task completion using intermediate deliverables or milestones. When project tasks are completed late or inadequately, the project manager will often find that the task was neglected until the last moment. The people we work with, like us, are responding to competing demands and respond with a just-in-time work product. Instead of complaining about this workplace reality, we can benefit by adapting our projects to it. By breaking a task into a series of intermediate tasks, we are able to ensure that the final goal is achieved with the added benefit of incremental feedback about task quality and cost. If we find there are problems with intermediate deliverables or milestones, we are positioned to address them. If those problems require an extension, we can request one in advance, based on a legitimate position.
- 5 Thank the person for completing the task. Sure, completing the task may have been in the person’s job description, but a few words of acknowledgement and appreciation will make a future working relationship

easier and more productive. If the contribution was less than perfect, consider using the “sandwich approach,” which calls attention to the positive aspects of contribution, identifies areas of improvement, and then concludes with an emphasis on the positive aspects of the contribution. This is the appropriate time to bring the supervisors into the loop, letting them know about outstanding performance so that they can do their job as personnel managers.

Some projects and business operations require that the project manager be fully responsible for performing all project tasks, thereby eliminating or minimizing the need to assign project tasks to others; however, most projects and business models establish the project manager as the one responsible for outcomes, requiring the project manager to move beyond financial spreadsheets, Gantt charts, and e-mail communications and interact directly with others. And while there are several options for interacting with others, the techniques used by successful line managers are directly applicable and readily adaptable to project management. em



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