Finding the management skills to get the job done

BY BETTY DOO

You have a top-notch team of dedicated, hard-working people who are technically savvy. Everyone is revved up and working overtime to get the job done.

You have a budget that is tight but manageable. You know you can do it but it is critical that you meet the deadline. The pressure is on and you are responsible for the results. Although everyone is busy, the job is not getting done. Tempers are flaring, tension is in the air. You call periodic meetings of the team but get nowhere. You wonder what is going wrong but can't figure it out.

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This is a familiar scenario in today's fast-paced business world. It cuts across industries and geographical boundaries. It is particularly evident in startups where the timeframe from inception to going public is a blur and technological achievements are outdated as soon as they hit the market.

Project management demands skills not generally taught in school — yet it is frequently the nontechnical skills that make or break a business, be it hardware, software or dot-coms. What are these nontechnical or "soft" skills that contribute to the success of forward moving companies? Can they be taught, or is one simply born with the capacity to manage complex, dynamic projects? Can one develop these skills with "on-the-job training?"

Unfortunately our focus on recruiting and training highly skilled technical workers sometimes overshadows the critical task of providing talented people the management tools to provide successful products and services. There is, however, a solution to this problem.

Developing managerial competence is quite possible and may be critical to your business. Don't be discouraged that you or your staff were not born with "the right stuff;" many technical leaders probably don't need a major overhaul, only customized training tailored to their specific professional development needs. Providing this training at the management level can ward off serious project delays and crises later on.

Key areas for project management training include:

• **Communication.** It is critical that you can clearly communicate your ideas, the project's needs and timeframes. Frequently managers think they are communicating clearly but their team members are confused. It is important to be direct about what you need, when you need it. Vague or conflicting messages often lead to misunderstandings which can cause costly diversions and delays. Learning about your own and other peoples' communication styles can substantially improve the work process. This is particularly helpful when leading culturally diverse work groups.

• **Building and sustaining a cohesive technical team.** The skills of a good manager are ultimately demonstrated by the results achieved. Although technical mangers usually perform the dual role of technician and manager, the successful completion of a project will depend upon how well the team as a whole functions. Despite the project-team approach, many managers frequently end up doing the job themselves or commanding others, rather than enlisting the collective synergy of a good working team. It may seem easier in the short run but could ultimately backfire. Developing solid team building skills leads to highly productive results.

• Decision-making. Today's business pace demands quick thinkers and fast but intelligent decisions. Long gone are the days when one had the luxury to mull over, debate and come to consensus about decisions. Project managers need the skills and confidence to make quick and creative decisions without second-guessing themselves.

• Dealing with conflict situations. The most lethal element in the workplace occurs when conflicts arise and they are not resolved. The fantasy is that if ignored, they will dissolve. The reality is they don't; they go undercover.

Openly confronting and resolving conflicts in the midst of the fast-paced world of technical management is no minor achievement. It is, however, all the more necessary. Unacknowledged conflicts which simmer do not fizzle out but escalate into major firestorms.

The role of the project manager in dealing with conflicts is often a tricky one and many people are not comfortable or prepared for these negotiations. Yet developing conflict resolution skills and learning to apply them can make the difference between completing a project or derailing it.

Workplace surveys report over and over again that "problems with my boss" is a major reason good workers leave and move on to new companies. Recruiting good technical talent to fill these vacancies is no small task in today's tight market. There are many ways to provide training that will meet the needs of today's project managers.

Management workshops and seminars, in-house mentoring and educational programs, and business coaching and consulting are all viable options. The costs of training managers pales next to the cost of a project gone awry or a mass exodus of disgruntled employees. Developing well-rounded project managers with technical, business and people skills keeps your company moving in the right direction.