

Managing Expectations and Lies

Question:

My company is implementing a new policy for project communications. They want all project managers to tell the truth – even if the project is doing poorly. The problem is that I don't think the managers in the company can handle the truth. The project managers think they will get beat up if admit how bad things are on some strategic projects. Do you think this is a good idea?

Johnny

Answer:

Johnny,

First of all I must tell you that it is a mistake to have a name like Johnny. What are you – eight years old? Names like Jimmy, Tommy, Pauly and Sammy have no place in the business world. We have a similar problem in my country with names such as Gyrry, Jursty and Protony. These are names for boys – not men. I will call you by a more formal name to increase your self esteem – Johnifrey.

So, Johnifrey what was your question? Oh yes, truth in communication. Yes, I agree with you that this is a bad idea and nothing good can come of it. Although your managers claim that they want to know the truth, the fact is that it is inconvenient and it will lead to more work from them. Therefore they tend to like the games that are played now.

Here is the discussion in a typical company. Mary (the manager) asks Omar (not a good name) how the project is progressing. Omar states that they have some concerns, but the team is trying to address them. Mary knows that if she pries too much she could be on the hook for helping to solve the problem and she really have too many of her own problems she is trying to hide right now. So she tells Omar to continue and “get those problems solved”.

Likewise Bill the manager might ask Ike (also not a good name) if the project will complete on schedule. Ike states that the chances are only 20%. Bill knows that if he states he is uncomfortable with 20% he may be on the hook to help. So instead he tells Ike to keep working hard and “turn the 20% into reality”.

You see Johnifrey, your managers don't really want to know how bad things are. They really want to have an excuse if things turn really bad. In my samples above, Mary can always say “Omar told me he was handling this problem” and Bill can say “Ike told me there was a likelihood that the project would still finish on target”.

So now you see how this game is played. All managers want this level of ignorance and deniability. I suggest that you also adopt this approach on your project. Let it be known that you want to hear the good things that are going on and you want the team to take care of problems. After all that is why they get paid. Then when things are totally out of control you can state that the team just informed you of all these problems and that you had no idea.

When you take this approach you become know as a problem solver, and all companies like problem solvers. Your team can be the problem makers, but you will be the problem

solver. Likewise your manager also wants to be a problem solver, so he wants to hear good news until the situation is totally out of control. Then he can swoop in and help resolve the problem that you... I mean that your team makes.

This is a beautiful system. Everyone loves it.

Now you have some know-it-all that claims that the status updates should be totally honest. You can follow this rule since you are providing honest updates – as best you know. See how this works.

Now get back to work Johnifrey, and get your project completed- successfully. I know you can do it (wink, wink).

PS. My apologies to any readers named Johnny, Jimmy, Tommy, Pauly, Sammy, Omar, Ike, Gyrry, Jursty or Protony.