
TIMELY RESPONSE

Another component of respect requires that the project manager work not only to understand consultants' needs but to respond to them, particularly the very real needs for payment. Project managers go a long way toward strengthening the relationship with project consultants if they process contracts and requisitions for payment in a timely way. If they handle these business issues quickly and seamlessly, they clear the way for the team to focus on project goals and not the ramifications of performing work without a contract in place, or what the status of their 60-day-old invoice might be. In other words, if project managers pay particular attention to contracts and billing and communicating their status on a regular basis, they will enable the consultant to respond better and faster to the needs of the project, and their particular or special requests. For instance, if the project manager needs to expedite a project milestone, the well-paid and informed consultant will be much more willing to dedicate additional resources to the cause if no questions surrounding payment and contracts exist.

Yet another factor in consultants' perceptions that project managers respect them is the degree to which the manager avoids favoritism. Occasionally, a dispute may arise between two or more members of the consultant team. The project managers must rely on his understanding of the positions of each of the team members to resolve the issue in an amicable fashion acceptable to all of the parties involved, while never losing sight of the project goals. The project leader must be careful not to take sides before understanding all the issues, and must also complete a fair investigation of the dispute. Because most disputes have very personal components, the resolution rendered must be nonpartisan, and it must also be consistent with the overall goals of the project. The project manager should provide a full explanation of the decision to all of the parties involved in the dispute, which will go a long way toward dispelling any perception problems that the team members may harbor, depending on the resolution.

CONCLUSION

The only way that a project manager can manage the consultant relationship well is never to stop learning. Regardless of how many years of experience and hundreds of jobs he or she has completed, the project manager will learn something new that can be applied to the next team. Even within the scope of a single project, the management of the consultant relationship is also an evolving learning process, because team interactions are as divergent as the personalities that fuel them. A truly gifted project manager will learn to identify and evaluate the team dynamic, perception issues, project goals, and his or her own skills, to make the next project even better.