

DON'T ALLOW A NEW PROJECT MANAGER TO FAIL ON A COMPLEX PROJECT

(BECAUSE YOU WITHOLD SUPPORT)

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Introduction

In this article, I share lessons from a personal experience I had as a project manager. The experience came when I was a new project manager and a brand new licensed surveyor. The company I worked for at the time was not in the land development business. Despite this, it decided to take on a massive land subdivision project for a partnership that included a long-time client. Let me tell you:

- 1) A little bit about the project.
- 2) Changes that occurred while I was working on the project.
- 3) My failures on the project.
- 4) How my management team failed to support my role as a project manager.
- 5) The lessons we can learn from this experience.

The Project

The land subdivision project involved subdividing 1,600 acres of vineyards. The vineyards occupied the rolling foothills east of Stockton. The subdivision would create 42 large ranchette lots. Our scope-of-services for the project included the following.

- 1) Creating a record-of-survey for the parent parcel boundary.
- 2) Creating and obtaining approval for a final parcel map for the subdivision.
- 3) Setting monuments at the corners of the new parcels.
- 4) Working with the partnerships land attorney on various issues related to the approval of the parcel map.

What type of challenges did this project present to me? There were several:

1) I wasn't a land development surveyor. That wasn't the type of work my company did. I wasn't familiar with the process.

2) The County had never approved a large lot subdivision of this scale. County staff were unsure about how the map should look or how the entitlement process would work.

3) The boundary survey to resolve the parent parcel was very complex. The vesting deed for the property contained several unique parcels. Surveyors hadn't previously mapped the parcels.

4) The boundary survey involved researching and reviewing a giant pile of survey maps and deeds. It also required the survey of well over a hundred individual property corners.

My Failures On The Project

How did I fail on this project? Four of my failures stand out in hindsight:

1) I didn't have a good system for organizing research and field surveys for a project this complex. This resulted in the omission of an important survey map from our original research. It also resulted in duplicated field work.

2) After I discovered the omitted survey map, the boundary resolution changed. This

required the removal and resetting of property corner monuments in the field.

3) My record-of-survey map for the parent parcel boundary was way too complicated. My effort to prepare a good map and show all the related data resulted in a work product that was hard to read. It also took too long to draw and obscured the most important information.

4) I failed to ask for more help and more time from my management team. I didn't recognize that I was being overwhelmed. I didn't want to admit my management team was asking me to perform above my skill set.

The Failures Of My Management Team

How did my management team fail to support my role as a new project manager? Remember, I'd never tackled a project of this type or scale. I didn't have my license when the project started. (I had it when we completed the project.) I believe my management team failed me in four

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important ways:

1) The management team accepted a project for an unreasonable fee. Instead of acknowledging this (and taking that the project wouldn't be profitable), they kept pressuring me to work faster. I remember sleeping for a few hours under my desk as we wrapped up a significant phase of the project. I had worked almost 20 hours the previous day. Why was this necessary? My management team didn't help me work more efficiently. They didn't give me more resources. They didn't identify areas where I was being inefficient. Instead, they imposed an arbitrary deadline to motivate completion of my tasks. My response was the same response I'd given the whole project. I poured in more of my uncompensated hours.

2) The management team didn't teach me to manage complexity. No one showed me a system to manage the research of field work. Our company had never managed a land development project of this size in its 80-year history. Recognizing that, they should've provided me with help from more experienced project managers. They didn't.

3) The resolution of the parent parcel boundary was one of the most challenging surveys I've done to date. My management team failed to understand these challenges. They also didn't offer different alternatives

to the location of difficult property corners.

4) The management team assigned an inexperienced project manager to a complex project on which our company lacked the required experience. This decision created a no-win situation for me, our client, and our company's profitability.

What Are The Lessons

What have I things has this project taught me personally?

I've had another decade or two in the land surveying business since I completed this project. In that time, I've dealt with other complex projects and difficult boundary resolutions. I've gotten more organized and my maps have gotten simpler. When my company accepts projects for unreasonable fees, I speak up in the beginning to set realistic expectations. These include realistic expectations for profitability and my level of effort.

What lessons does this story offer

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management teams at other surveying companies? Let's take away the three most important lessons:

1) Assign your new project managers a mentor on complex projects. Don't set them up to fail. Make sure the mentor has the correct type of experience. Make sure the mentor stays involved in the project. The mentor doesn't need to micromanage. Let the new project manager make decisions and execute, but have the mentor available to offer guidance.

2) Teach your new project managers important skills for managing complex projects. The skills includes setting up systems to track the progress of work and to manage tasks like research and field surveys.

3) Match the skills of your new project managers to the projects you assign them. By allowing them to start with smaller and simpler projects, you build their confidence. You also give them a chance to enjoy the success of a well-executed project.

If you've got a new project manager sleeping under this desk to meet a deadline you've imposed, you've got a huge problem. That problem isn't the guy missing out on sleep at home; it's you. Think about that while you are drooling on your pillow.

Conclusion

I'm glad I was able to work on the project in this story. It taught me valuable lessons. It provided me with excellent experience as a land development surveyor. It also helped me realize, after 12 years, that my company at the time was a poor fit for my values. Now that I've shared this story, I hope my pain on the project will also help you and your management team.

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