

Political Reasons for Failed Software Projects

Johann Rost

... in which I describe how subversive behavior can sabotage software projects.

How is it possible that a software project involves people who want the project to fail? Here are some reasons:



- Users feel that the project threatens their job.
- Stakeholders fear that their working conditions might worsen.
- Stakeholders dislike the additional control the project entails.
- Engineers are unhappy with the project lead assignment and hope to gain control themselves (after destroying the project lead's reputation).
- Stakeholders fear that their influence in the organization is in danger because many software projects result in one group assuming power and another losing it.
- Regarding offshore-outsourcing relationships, engineers sometimes must train colleagues who do the same work for much less pay.
- Stakeholders in some projects are competitors in other fields (for example, when competing companies form a limited alliance to carry through a software project).

Subversive influence encompasses a wide range of intensity. At the benign end are stakeholders who “just want this stupid project to disappear” but who more or less behave loyally. At the malignant end are subversive stakeholders, who are intent on destroying the project through carefully planned attacks.

Software projects are fragile and difficult enough to successfully complete under normal conditions. So, a project will be particularly prone to any subversive behavior.

The subversive person often assumes little responsibility and occupies a border position in the project. If that person left the project completely, he or she would lose influence. However, if that person entered the project's core team, he or she would have to take responsibility for the project's failure.

Subversive behavior

A subversive person can act to a software project's detriment in many ways:

- Insisting on vague concerns to block the project's progress. After all, who dares to continue if a respected colleague has apparently serious concerns?
- Refusing to provide necessary information, deliberately limiting a colleague's access to required details, or concealing important yet not required information related to the project. For example, when asked for the shortest way to the city center, the subversive person responds that it's on the other side of the bridge after the next intersection—without mentioning that the bridge is closed this week.
- Delaying access to information (for example, emailing a short response after three days, under the pretext of having been busy).
- Refusing to give an answer under the claim

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of not having enough knowledge of the matter under discussion.

- Deliberately giving vague or evasive answers.
- Increasing tension within social relationships through extensive, provoking criticism.
- Insisting on highly complex technical details, thus causing a blockage of the project (although in some cases such matters might be impossible to solve at such an early stage).
- Injecting “poisoned” ideas into the project—ideas that initially appear reasonable but that will have serious repercussions later, when it’s too late for corrective action. Poisoned ideas are especially dangerous when they come from an experienced project manager whose knowledge of software project pit-

falls lets him or her sabotage the project.

All actions of suspect stakeholders should be carefully supervised, especially when clear indications exist that the stakeholder might benefit from the project’s failure. By carefully observing the suspected stakeholder, the project lead can frequently confirm or refute suspicions, even if he or she relies largely on intuition. Raising suspicions is often the first and most important defensive step, because it makes the risk more manageable. As long as the subversive stakeholder is trusted, the project is in serious danger.

Frequently subversive behavior is easy to notice and understand when a project includes an individual with comprehensive technical knowledge, soft skills, and political instincts. Because many projects don’t have such an

individual, a high percentage of subversive behavior goes unreported. I’ve encountered cases where the clients had the necessary soft skills but lacked the technical background, or where technical staff had the necessary software knowledge but lacked soft skills or interest in such problems.

Stopping subversive behavior

Obviously, senior management should stop subversive behavior. However, this is easier said than done because management isn’t always aware of problems.

Who should inform senior management, and on what evidence should this action be based? Gathering evidence can be difficult. Subversive stakeholders frequently use informal channels of information to avoid getting caught. In addition, stakeholders can easily and reasonably justify their actions and apparently exempt themselves from suspicion of conspiring.

In the case of several organizations working together, “senior management” is hard to define. The subversive stakeholder’s superior might even be involved in the sabotage. Informing the supervisor would only make him or her aware that suspicions exist.

Corrective measures depend on the particular situation, the easiest solution often being to remove the subversive person from the project. But this isn’t always possible or even wise, because he or she might have considerable influence in the organization. Instead, it might be more reasonable to isolate the project from the subversive influence (for example, by blocking all the stakeholder’s suggestions).

For projects with several independent organizations, a wise decision might be to involve an arbitrator (or project advocate), who should have no close relationships to any of the organizations—similar to a soccer referee. In addition, the arbitrator should have political sense, rich experience in project management, and comprehensive technical understanding and authority. The arbitrator’s duty is to make the project successful as a whole—that is, to pre-

Case Study

Five companies decided to cooperate to develop a strategic new software product. Although they were market competitors, they formed a limited alliance for this project.

They decided to outsource the software from an external producer. While reporting the intermediate results to the top management, a representative from one of the companies raised serious technical concerns and suggested canceling the project. Overwhelmed, the project’s technical lead couldn’t react adequately to the unexpected problems. He barely persuaded management to delay the decision until the project team could do further analysis. The delay helped the team deal with the problems and finish the project, more or less successfully.


Of course, clearly expressing technical concerns can be a great contribution. However, the project manager asked the representative why he hadn’t mentioned his concerns before the meeting and given the project team time to prepare a qualified response. His official response was that his concerns arose during the meeting. The manager didn’t question him further, but the project engineers doubted that analyzing such a complex technical problem in considerable detail in such a short time was even possible. They suspected that the representative carefully prepared his concerns well before the meeting.

There was no apparent reason for the representative to act subversively. Project members discovered much later that his company had been secretly developing its own version of the product. It participated in the alliance to access the know-how, find out details about the project’s progress, and, most important, disturb its development. Had the project failed, the disloyal company would have been in a position to launch its secretly developed product on its own.

vent one of the organizations from optimizing its profit at the expense of other organizations or the project itself. In other words, the main concern should be ensuring that no subversive stakeholders endanger the project.

Many project managers have encountered subversive stakeholders in one way or another. An informal survey of project managers I know showed that in a large number of cases, the subversive stakeholders were ultimately successful, at least partly. Even though I'm not aware of any quantitative studies of this problem, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that subversive stakeholders are a top-ten risk in a significant number of software projects. It's possible that many people know what's going on behind the scenes, but no one dares to come clean about it. Most surveys concerning failed projects don't even address the existence of

subversive stakeholders because they list "official" reasons for failure—such as unclear requirements, insufficient planning, poor quality, unrealistic esti-

mations, and other "clean" reasons. 

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