

The Stripes, Spots, and Yellow Streaks of School District Stakeholders

Project managers like to tout their skill in building buy-in among the stakeholders of a project.

Stakeholders are those people who have a stake in the project's success. These people could be anyone who touches (or is impacted by) the project in any way.

Scenario #1:

When the Scenario #1 process is working in a flawed manner, for example, a director decides to implement a new math program, district-wide. A salesperson visited, provided slick brochures, a CD, maybe even a luncheon and a high-pitched sales presentation.

Anyway, the director is "sold" and decides to use "left-over" federal funds to purchase the program. Then, at the start of the next school year, teachers receive training in how to add this supplemental and expensive set of materials to their math classes.

Of course, this is backwards from how this should work, and the implementation of the materials meets with resistance...some subtle, some not so subtle. After a year, no one is using the materials, and the director begins to sweat, a cold sweat fueled by fear. Someone might find out that the project was a complete flop.

Scenario #2:

This time, a new salesperson with another set of materials visits with teachers (maybe a committee) to build buy-in.

Teachers are promised better student scores, access to add-on technology (CDs), and high student interest. Every question that teachers ask is met with a slick redirect, and the sales person, they call him or her "the Closer" overcomes every question that teachers have.

Results: This initiative begins to march in step to the roll out of Scenario #1, and the results are about the same.

After a year, the salesperson visits the district, driving in a new luxury European sedan, and selling a new product.

Scenario #3:

The superintendent puts out the word that directors and principals should look favorably on the products of one particular company. But, the superintendent is very busy, and absent mindedly omits the fact that the salesperson from that company is a brother-in-law.

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Wanting to "score points" with the superintendent, principals and directors trip over each other in their scramble to be the first to impress the superintendent with the quantity of their knowledge as measured through the size of their order.

When minimal, even negative results, result; no culpable individual wants to bring accountability measures to the table; and the de facto conspiracy of silence is the traditional group response.

Scenario #4: (Note: This scenario is so pervasive that it is often thought of as standard operating procedure.)

Budgets are devised from a fixed-pot mentality. Folks scramble to spend the money that they were assigned to use last year, making rush-to-spend misjudgments, and avoiding contact with knowledgeable front-line workers (such as teachers) while making purchasing decisions.

Common wisdom dictates that unspent budget money will be taken back the next year, and money cannot be "rolled over." This means that budget managers cannot save up for complex, multi-year projects, and that projects generally must conform to fiscal year time frames. A corollary to this is that most budgets, most projects and many grants are under funded in educational bureaucracies.

Here is what actually affects a project (each allowance should be budgeted):

- Estimated cost
- Allowance for price increases from the time of proposal until the time of project approval
- Allowance for items missed in the original estimation
- Allowance for things going wrong
- Allowance for additional benefits to be added as they show up to make the project stronger

What is actually budgeted?:

- Arbitrary amount of estimated cost, say 80%

Let's say that you pad the project proposal's budget so that you can account for some of the allowances, say 10%. Then, when the decision-makers cut the project budget by 20% you end up with a project that is 12% short of funds.

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Here is the math:

	Percentage	Funding Amount
Original project cost:	100%	\$100
Padding for allowances:	110%	\$110
Arbitrary approval	80%	\$88
Actual shortfall	12%	\$12

What is pervasive is that legitimate education (and bureaucratic) projects tend to be under funded and under resourced.

-> Sidebar <-

Of course, this does not include the pork barrel projects intended to throw money to a legislator's home district, or the projects that superintendents push to gain favor with the School Board or the community.

Such projects tend to be over funded, over resourced and unaccountable.

-> Sidebar <-

The almost certain under funding of projects leads to a higher likelihood that the projects will fall short of their potential. The politics of the funding process, and the pandering to a constituency (whether a school board or an electorate) leads to increased pressure by decision-makers to be "good budget managers." This means that these "leaders" will try to maximize spin and public credit for "positive solutions at their direction." This also means that they will attempt to be visible in all the areas that diverse stakeholders demand.

The pressure here is to try to spread the available funds (never enough) across as many programs as possible, i.e., give something to everybody. Of course, this strategy maximizes decision-maker's political capital, but proves to be shortsighted.

This is the mechanism that causes projects to be under funded by some arbitrary formula.

- The projects that are selected will be ones that benefit the decision-maker's political agenda in some way.
- The projects that are selected (and under funded) also stand a minimal chance of success unless...
- The project planner somehow padded the project with estimates that are higher than the arbitrary funding cut off

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- The project planner has control of other budget funds that can be used to bail out the under funded project

There are price drops in the major components of the project during the budget process delay

What occurs after the general under funding of projects is where the title of this article gets its name.

The Stripes, Spots, and Yellow Streaks of School District Stakeholders "Stripes" and "Spots" refer to the flim flam of, when beneficiaries (such as students or teachers) need a "tiger" of a project, that the decision-makers pawn off a much cheaper "leopard" of a project, instead.

But, it is the "Yellow" or cowardly streaks that exist in stakeholders at all levels of authority and accountability that are the most insidious. Here, the budget manager, instead of saying, "Look, if you can't provide the funds to do the project right, I don't want the money." Instead, the budget manager thanks the stingy political decision-maker and tries to salvage whatever is possible of the project. Results: corner-cutting and less than the high quality that students and teachers deserve.

Here the Principals, instead of saying, "Look, my staff deserves support and all the tools they need, if you can't fund the project adequately, we don't want the money." Instead, the principal thanks the entire chain of command overhead (no pun intended), and plans how to motivate teachers.

Here the teachers, instead of saying, "Look, this project is unrealistic, and the expected outcomes are unreasonable. If we can't get the support and funding that we need, tell the decision-makers to shove the money ..." Instead, the teachers proffer a fake smile, and put in the long hours of uncompensated time that are necessary to salvage a substandard project. Since we prefer to offer useful suggestions instead of criticism, here is what should be done.

First, all items on the budget should be identified, and complete costs should be calculated.

Next, all items should be listed in priority, top to bottom, no exceptions.

Next, a multiplier to account for price increases, to account for items missed in the budget calculation, funds to enhance the project when new opportunities present themselves to make the project a success and a contingency fund should be applied. This figure should be between 15 to 20%.

Last, a line should be drawn, and all project items below the line should be funded.

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This strategy solves two problems: 1.) Projects are funded with enough money to make them viable and 2.) Projects that are not a priority do not drain funds from important projects.

Now, if for example, reading, math, science, social studies and health have a higher priority than, say extracurricular and varsity sports, then the district just won't have a varsity sports program.

If, on the other hand, varsity sports are more important than computers, the district will conduct a varsity sports program and sell the computers.

If the district finds that teacher staff development is a lower priority than library books, then no teachers will receive training.

All the conflicting state and federal regulations need to be factored in, like NCLB, if the district determines that meeting these requirements is detrimental to students, the district just doesn't take the money.

This way, the funding and support process will become honest, and real leaders will emerge in the district.

What needs to come to an end is the "in word only" priorities that are driven by badgering teachers to do more work without pay.

What the status quo system encourages is:

- Fake-Stakeholders
- Sham budgets
- Non-Nutritive Projects ("Trimming Fat" is spin language for anemic, no-meat funding)
- Credit taking when no credit is due
- Replacement initiatives with no accountability as to the decision-maker's complicity at the failure of the previous initiative
- Fanfare at doing more with less, instead of discovering why lowered student outcomes is the norm and status quo

The district with courageous leaders who can say, "If there is no money, there is no priority" will become a magnet for educators from all across the nation to visit and learn how being simple, open, transparent, honest and practical benefits students.

Who knows, perhaps even state and federal legislators will take notice, and operate from a new level of honesty and service to their constituents.

Hello! What am I doing here on Fantasy Island? Pinch me. I must be dreaming to believe that politicians will change their stripes, communicate honestly, and just support projects that work to benefits everyone.