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Managers must find ways to help projects and teams flourish even as resources diminish.

Lawrence Leach,
Principal, Advanced
Projects Inc.,
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BY SUSAN LADIKA ★ PHOTOS BY CHRIS BUTLER

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When Pattie Vargas, PMP, worked as a project manager for an IT company, every day was a struggle—she found a new chief executive to be dictatorial and bullying, few resources were appropriated to projects and tight budgets often pitted managers against one another as they tried to protect their own turf. “It was all so adversarial,” she says. “There was a tendency to protect ‘mine,’ which made it really hard to partner with people.”

As project managers work to reach goals in the face of dwindling resources, maintaining good will and efficiency is a challenge. Like Ms. Vargas, both executives and project managers are looking for ways to get, and keep, projects on track.

Across

“Across all industries, people must deal with diminishing resources,” says Ms. Vargas, who now heads The Vargas Group, San Diego, Calif., USA. “But beating up project team members is not the way to deal with it.” Maintaining a positive work environment that encourages teamwork, making a concerted effort to quell scope creep and allocating resources more strategically can help buoy project teams that feel the crunch of today’s workplace.

Acknowledge the Environment

→ A simple first step in diffusing the tension of a resource-depleted workplace is acknowledging that it exists. Without a lot of money to reward team members,

the biggest challenge in construction projects and occurs when “the client hasn’t fully bought into the scope of the work.”

→ It’s crucial to define what success will look like and obtain consensus from the team, says Deborah Hoard, president of Net Results, a Burlingame, Calif., USA-based marketing project management firm that specializes in salvaging troubled marketing communications projects. “You need to make sure they all agree on the same goal, and work with executives to make sure the end goal is realistic with the resources available.”

One of Ms. Hoard’s challenges involved preparing marketing materials for a product launch in only one week; typically it would take months to develop materials including brochures, packaging, retail displays, press kits and Web pages. In this case, “you need to scale back what success will look like,” which meant identifying the bare bones of what needed to be done to launch the product and then producing the remaining materials in the second project phase.

Even when a project isn’t being done on a tight time schedule, defining the scope of the project upfront is crucial, says Eric Spanitz, president of Synergist Inc., a Chicago, Ill., USA-based management consulting and training firm. Along with an “assumption list” to define expectations and project scope, he urges project managers to use a “not list” that clearly defines what is not included in the project scope. “This way, the resources you have are not spread too thin and people aren’t working on too many extra things,” he says.

Unearth Untapped Potential

Team members tend to interact based on their position on the team—this can overlook the totality of members’ professional capacity. Any team member might have much wider-ranging knowledge and sources of information than others might realize, and project managers should make it a point to inquire and learn about the range of knowledge and competency team members bring to a project.

→ If manpower is scarce, Ms. Hoard suggests grouping tasks together based on the core competencies of the people involved. For example, a person with both accounting

Ms. Vargas often pays for little treats out of her own pocket and leaves cards on employees’ keyboards telling them what a great job they are doing. Once she stuffed a piñata with food and trinkets and let team members take a swing at it in the park-ing lot. “That 20-minute activity generated a huge amount of good will and efficiency over the next several days,” she recalls.

executive summary

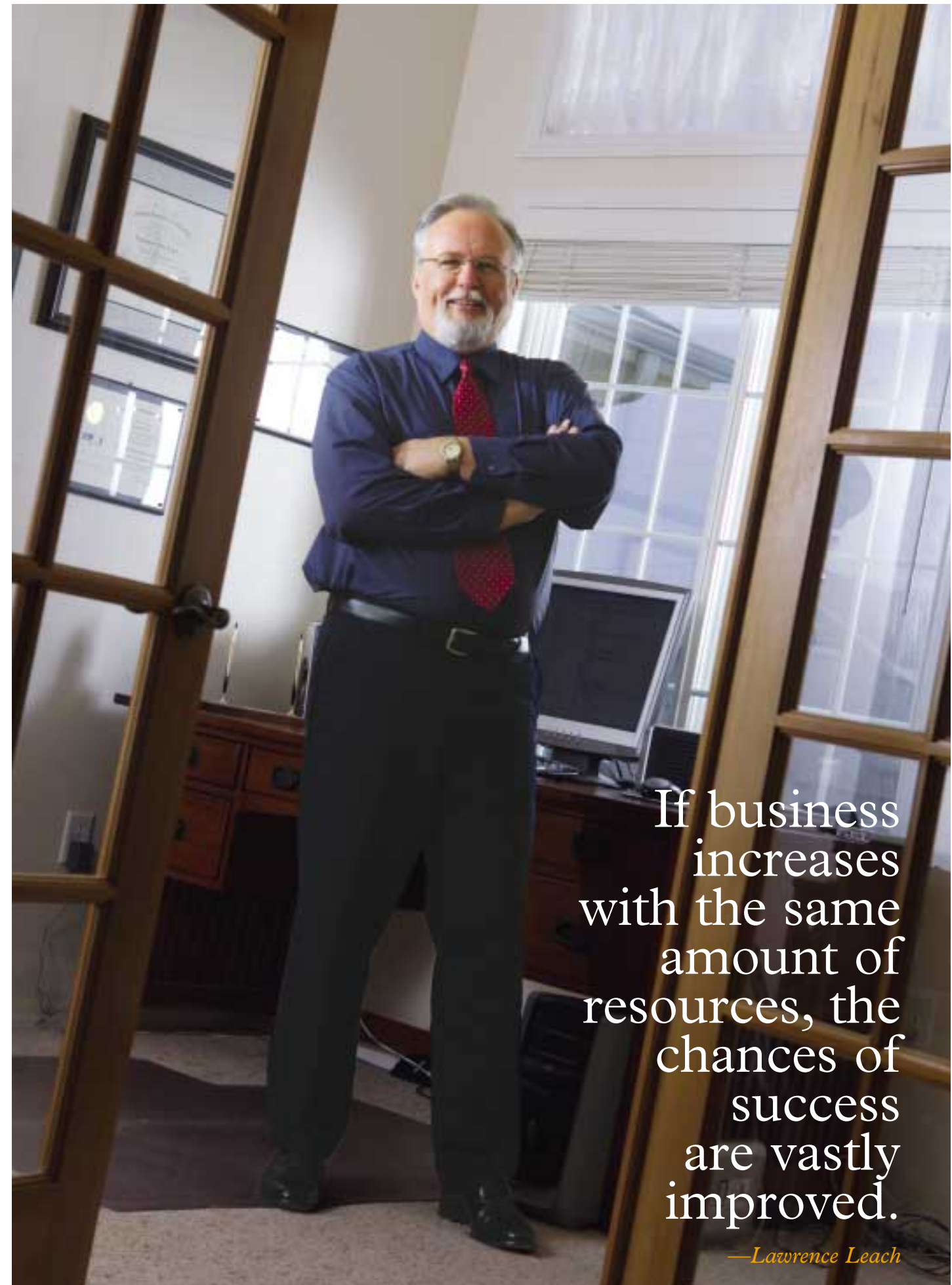
- Building relationships and networking is critical; effective managers never forget to pat team members on the back for a job well done.
- Specifying goals realistically in the context of available resources prevents projects from being side-tracked by scope creep.
- Finding ways to uncover the gamut of a team member’s experience may allow efficient grouping of project duties without overwhelming individuals.
- Resource scarcity should not be epidemic, and executives and project managers must assess the work environment to find better ways of executing projects.

Open communication is necessary to enhance team-building and ensure that there are no hidden agendas or potential conflicts, says Mounir Ajam, PMP, human resources development coordinator for Saudi Aramco, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

“If people can believe that the team—not the individual—wins, the chance of success definitely is increased when times are tight,” Mr. Ajam says. “Team members need to feel that they trust each other.”

Halt the Creep

Team members and other stakeholders must work together to prevent scope creep, which Mr. Ajam says is



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—Lawrence Leach

The Scarcity Bug



When things get tight, it's all too easy for project managers to fall into a "scarcity mindset" where they believe there are never enough resources to complete a project. Tim Sanders, leadership coach at

Yahoo! and keynote speaker at the 2004 PMI Global Congress—North America, believes this thought process is dangerous, setting a detrimental foundation for the future of projects and project managers themselves.

Developing a scarcity mindset is like "coming down with a cold" and the ensuing fear that it will spread, Mr. Sanders says. "Fear becomes the blunt instrument used to manage projects."

In the scarcity-filled workplace, managers don't want to share what resources they do have, fearing there aren't enough to go around. "They become highly unattractive at an emotional and psychological level," Mr. Sanders says. "There's a personal implosion when they come down with scarcity."

To thwart this collapse, he urges all key project team members and executives to adopt an abundance mindset based on the premise that there's enough to go around and always will be. This is characterized by project team members sharing breakthrough ideas and advice with one another, consciously building their network of relationships and becoming more compassionate in the workplace and around the work-life issues of their teammates.

"Have an abundance of compassion and learn to tell people they're great," he says. "Faith beats fear when it comes to bringing out the best in other people. Long after people forget what you did for them, they'll remember how you made them feel."

and procurement experience could work with outside vendors and track purchase orders and payments, even though these two areas may not traditionally be performed by the same individual. "You want to charm people," she says. "If you try to strong-arm people, that will destroy the relationship. With good relationships, you can do a lot more with fewer resources."

When possible, Youn-Wai Ley, project manager with Hewlett-Packard Singapore's global delivery team, opts to use team members who already have worked together. He finds this to be a more viable option because the learning curve is reduced, as is the time needed to understand how each person works and behaves in a group.

"Conflicts and misunderstandings often happen in the beginning of the project," he says. "A learning period to me also means learning to work together. Good mentoring to new team members will ease the transition and help the new team build up its confidence while working under a lot of stress."



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Project Manager,
Hewlett-Packard, Singapore

Align Resources Strategically

If extra resources are available, Bob Tarne, PMP, senior consultant with Havertown, Pa., USA-based PM Solutions and head of PMI's Information Technology & Telecommunications SIG, suggests hiring a project controller to serve as the right hand of the project manager. The project controller can take on tasks such as tracking status reports and making schedules and budgets, allowing the project manager to focus on the strategic aspects of the project. This strategy also can free the project manager's time to work on more than one project.

On the other hand, Lawrence Leach, principal of Advanced Projects Inc., Boise, Idaho, USA, suggests that, "jumping back and forth takes longer." He touts critical chain project management methods that allow team members to focus on one task at a time, which can boost productivity by 100 percent and avoid the inclination to cut resources in the first place, he says.

Mr. Leach offers the example of a shipping company that has five longshoremen to unload five ships. The company could assign one longshoreman to each ship on Monday, but the ships won't go back to sea until Friday. However, he says if all five longshoremen are assigned to unload one ship on Monday, that ship will be ready to set sail on Tuesday, decreasing turn-around time by 80 percent. With this strategy, by Friday morning, only one ship—not all five—will still be at the dock.

While delaying the start of a project or project task "seems illogical" to executives, it can lead to increased productivity and business growth, Mr. Leach says. If

business increases with the same amount of resources, "the chances of success are vastly improved."

Separate Anomaly From Pathology

→ Arguably, it's easy to apply fixes and Band-aids to a taxed and tapped-out work environment. But it's critical for the organization to determine if a lack of resources is a one-time occurrence or the norm, Ms. Hoard says.

Problems can occur for project managers because, "if you pull off miracles, people are going to expect them all the time," she says. The result is a burned-out project team and a project more susceptible to error and oversight. "If you're always in fire-drill mode, the quality goes down, tempers get shorter and things just start to fall apart."

Project managers must be prepared to speak up about inadequate resources, as executives sometimes offer limited resources just to see if project managers can get by with what they have. As projects progress, an executive often will propose a new idea and ask if it's possible to add it into the project, and team members agree in an effort to look good and help out the boss.

"When that happens, it bogs things down," Mr. Spanitz says. He currently is involved with several projects for a West Virginia, USA, window company and had to explain that the company either had to pump more resources into the projects, put a number of projects on hold or try to do them all and allow quality to suffer. To combat this type of executive miscalculation, he recommends that project managers be prepared with a drawing of an equilateral triangle that illustrates how time, resources and quality need to remain in balance—the premise is that adjusting one side means the other two sides also need adjustment.

"You have to have some kind of reason that executives can understand," Mr. Spanitz says. "I think a lot of project managers are very technical. They know what to do, but they just fall short in speaking executive-eze." **PM**

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