Acquiring Political Skills
And Building Influence
by J. Davidson Frame,
The New Project Management

Practitioners of the new project management recognize that life is often messy. Management practice has a way of deviating sharply from management theory. People do not fit into neat categories and do not behave according to well-known formulas.

One important messy reality is that on projects, politics is inevitable. All project managers will encounter it in some measure. It is futile to fight it. Wise project managers learn to accommodate to it. Although the term politics has negative connotations, project managers who master its intricacies come to see its positive qualities. They know that if they are to get the job done, then they will have to develop political skills.

What Is Politics?

The concept of politics is difficult to nail down. Even dictionaries— normally precise in defining terms— are not very helpful here. Their definitions of politics often have an element of circularity to them, as in “the art or science of political government” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1978, p. 1015). To the extent that they talk of politics outside the context of government, they portray it in highly negative terms, as in “factional scheming within a group” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1964, p. 1132).

Any practical discussion of politics must come to grips with its negative image because for many people this negative image stands in the way of their developing effective political skills. President John Kennedy caught the spirit of our ambivalence toward politics when he said, “Mothers may still want their favorite sons to grow up to be President, but they do not want them to become politicians in the process” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1978, p. 1015). The negative feeling toward politics is captured in adjectives commonly used to describe the politician: conniving, shifty, unprincipled, selfish, corrupt, Machiavellian, and amoral. The common theme of these adjectives is the nonadherence of politicians to a clear set of moral principles that guide them in their undertakings.

Although many examples in our daily newspapers appear to confirm this view of politics and the politician, we must recognize that the image of politics as sleaze strongly distorts the true nature of politics. At heart, politics is the art of influence. For the most part, politicians do not achieve their goals and the goals of their constituents by virtue of their powerful muscles, their large bank accounts, or their use of military force. Politicians are successful in their work only to the extent that they can effectively influence others to do their bidding. For example, elected politicians must first influence the electorate to vote for them. Once elected, they maintain their influence by serving their constituents’ needs. To do this, they influence other politicians to back their positions. When politicians lose this ability to influence the outcome of events, they become powerless.

Another feature of politics is that it is the lubricant that allows the wheels of organized human activity to turn without jamming. People are in conflict with each other because they pursue conflicting goals. We see this all around us at all levels of human activity. At the level of the individual, we may find a husband and wife struggling over the household thermostat because one wants the house to be warmer, the other...
cooler. At the level of the community, we frequently encounter battles between advocates of economic growth and antigrowth forces who want to maintain the aesthetic integrity of the community. At the national level, there are struggles between those who desire strong government social programs and those who champion a laissez-faire role for government. Internationally, of course, the struggle over conflicting goals can have catastrophic consequences resulting in war.

The way conflict is resolved is through accommodation—which is to say, through political efforts. If this does not work, the consequences will be chaos, stalemate, or outright hostile actions. This is what Karl von Clausewitz meant when he said, in his classic book *On War*, “War is the continuation of politics by other means” (1833).

Taking into account these considerations, we can improve upon dictionary definitions of politics by defining it in the following way: *Politics is the process whereby attempts are made to achieve goals through accommodation and the exercise of influence.*

**Politics in Projects**

Project environments are excellent breeding grounds for rampant politics. An important reason for this is that authority on projects is diffuse. On most projects, managers do not “own” their resources. Staff are borrowed from functional areas so they “belong” to someone else. A large part of efforts of project managers is devoted to wangling these resources from functional managers. Their lives are complicated by the fact that they are competing against other project managers and functional heads for these scarce resources like five hungry dogs fighting for a single bone. Obtaining needed resources often entails a good deal of horse-trading and the occasional issuance of implied or explicit threats.

**Players to Contend with in the Project Environment**

Authority is diffuse in another sense as well. On most projects, managers find themselves surrounded by in any key players who have the power to make or break the project. It behooves project managers to spend some time reflecting on these actors and how they can affect the course of events. Such reflection will identify the many ways that politics creeps into projects. The following are some key players.

**Bosses**

Project managers work with varying degrees of independence. Some call the shots on budgeting, scheduling, and resource utilization; others are basically baby-sitters. In all cases, they are ultimately accountable to someone above them in the hierarchy. That is, they have bosses.

Bosses can make a big difference in whether project managers have good or bad experiences with their projects. They can affect project performance both materially and psychologically. For example, in an emergency they can supply their project managers with extra human and material resources. On a psychological plane, fear of a bad performance review by the boss can make a project manager so risk-averse that no hard decisions are made on the project.

There is one important political fact that all project managers should bear in mind: their bosses are not neutral in regard to their project. Their bosses are in fact stakeholders in the project. For example, bosses
themselves have bosses. Their relations with their bosses may be sensitive to the performance of the project manager. Success of a highly visible project may reflect positively on their management ability and lead to promotions and bonuses, whereas failure may assure them a spot in their organization’s gulag.

Bosses are frequently stakeholders in another sense as well: with the acquisition of projects, they can enlarge their turf. Our project may be yet one more tool they can employ to strengthen their position in the organization. Even bosses who are totally devoid of ambition are stakeholders in a very mundane sense: if their project managers should run into trouble, this will create administrative and political hassles for them and make their lives generally unpleasant.

The political implications of bosses being stakeholders are significant. It means that politically savvy project managers must view their decisions from their boss’s perspective. They must know what their boss’s goals are in relation to the project. If they do not do this, they may find their decisions being reversed and support for their efforts declining. Ultimately, insensitivity to the boss’s goals may lead to poor performance ratings and denial of future managerial responsibilities.

**Peers**

By the term peers we are referring to coworkers who operate at the same level of responsibility as we do. They very likely are project managers themselves. Because they are our equals in the hierarchy, we have no direct control over them. If we want their cooperation, we must obtain this through influence, not fiat.

Our relations with our project peers are often filled with ambiguity. On the one hand, they can be our helpmates. They can provide us with crucial information, share their resources, and offer us a shoulder to cry on, serve as a sounding board for ideas, and act as our political allies.

On the other hand, they are our competitors. This is true in two senses. First, they compete with us for scarce resources. As a consequence, they may be involved in all sorts of behind-the-scenes machinations to assure that they can acquire these resources—possibly at our expense. Second, they compete with us for career advancement. As we progress higher in the organizational pyramid, there is more and more competition for fewer job slots. The fact that pyramids are crumbling and organizations are flattening only intensifies competition. If our peers have any ambition at all, we can be sure that they hear a little voice somewhere inside them telling them that our successes may jeopardize their advancement.

**Functional Managers Controlling Resources**

Because project managers do not own their resources, they must borrow them from functional areas within the organization. Project managers spend a good deal of effort trying to acquire needed resources from the functional managers who control them.

Their chief concerns in acquiring resources revolve around the following questions: Can I acquire resources that satisfy the technical requirements of the project? Will they be of good quality and do what it takes to get the job done? Will I have enough of them? Will I be able to obtain them when I need them? Will I be able to keep them for the time I need them, or will they be pulled off the project to fight fires somewhere else?
Sometimes the acquisition of these resources is straightforward. For example, the project manager may tell the head of data processing that she needs a data base specialist for a two-month period beginning on September 9th. After checking a resource calendar, the DP head may make arrangements guaranteeing her that her request will be satisfied.

However, obtaining resources is generally more complex than this. Project environments are dynamic. Plans change—schedules slip, budgets are cut or augmented, new tasks emerge, people become ill, new staff sign on, and so on. In such an environment, the acquisition of resources becomes a major challenge. Success in getting who we need when we need them may depend more upon our powers of persuasion over managers who control resources than upon our ability to fill out resource request forms properly. That is, in acquiring resources, political skills can be important.

**Customers**

Not long ago customers played only a peripheral role on projects even though the purpose of these projects was purportedly to produce a deliverable that would satisfy them. The reason for this was confidence in the superior expertise of the project staff. The assumption was that by dint of their education, experience, and high levels of intelligence, project staff knew what was best for customers. This being the case, why muddy the waters with heavy customer involvement in the development of the deliverable?

An important feature of the new project management is the belief that customers are kings. In fact, project success and failure are defined in terms of satisfying customers. A project is said to fail if its deliverables are not used or are underused or misused by customers; in the new project management, the view that the experts know what is best for customers is seen to be paternalistic and self-serving.

Close contact with customers carries with it a major consequence that is relatively new to project management: project staff must develop good people skills so that they can interact productively with their clients. They have to become politically astute since they are dealing with players who lie outside of their control and who possess different goals than they do. This means that they must be able to put themselves into their customers’ shoes so that they can appreciate their needs more fully. They must also be willing and able to live with compromise since their vision of what is best for the customers will often differ from the customers’ perception of what is best.

Unfortunately, the development of good customer relations skills can be stressful for many project staff members, who did not go into computer programming, electrical engineering, or accounting because they had an urge to work closely with people. For the most part, these individuals have little political savvy. Yet to work effectively to produce deliverables that satisfy customers, they must develop it.

**Vendors**

On the surface, it would appear that there should be few political problems with vendors since project managers have a degree of control over them. After all, if vendors do not deliver, project managers need not pay them.

This view hides a reality that experienced project managers are acutely aware of: getting something out of
vendors is a complex process. Common problems in dealing with them include:

- The deliverable arrives late, causing us to incur a schedule slippage.
- The deliverable does not meet the specifications agreed upon, so it is unusable.
- The invoice price of the deliverable is higher than the estimated price originally quoted, contributing to cost overruns.

When these kinds of problems arise, how should they be dealt with? Or better yet, what can be done to avoid them in the first place? The answers to these questions are not obvious and must be worked out in the context of specific circumstances. Frequently the answers involve more than threatening nonpayment for goods, canceling the contract, or instituting a lawsuit for breach of contract. A project staff’s primary objective in dealing with vendors is to get the needed goods and services from them in as effective a manner as possible. If vendor problems translate into budget, schedule, or requirements problems for the project, it is small consolation to us that we can withhold payments.

As with so much in project management, dealing with vendors requires political skills. With these skills, project staff can anticipate problems before they arise and identify ways to pressure the vendors to meet their obligations. Without them, project staff are at the mercy of events that lie outside of their control.

**Others (Purchasing, Information Resource Management, Contracts, Secretaries)**

The list of project players who can be involved in political activity extends beyond what has been listed here. A sampling of other common players includes:

- Purchasing department—for example, their foot-dragging in placing orders can lead to slow deliveries of needed supplies and services.
- Information resource management—for example, their insistence that we buy a computer that meets organizational standards may lead to the procurement of a device that does not fully meet the project’s needs.
- Contracts office—for example, their narrow interpretation of contract clauses may not allow for needed changes in the requirements for a deliverable to be supplied by a contractor.
- Secretaries—for example, their lack of commitment to project work may result in delayed progress and poor quality reports.

**Being a Better Politician**

Some people seem to be born politicians. They appear to have an instinctive capacity to size up the political dimensions of different situations and to know what to do to have their will prevail. Being politically astute is as natural to them as taking a stroll.

Most of us are not born politicians. Furthermore, our upbringing and education do not prepare us for the political realities of life because our parents and teachers are as politically naive as we are. In fact, given the prevailing view that politics is dirty, we are encouraged to avoid anything that smacks of political maneuvering. As a consequence, when we enter into political situations, we are like lambs being led to slaughter.

**Common Political Pitfalls**
There are many ways that we can get into trouble politically. Following are some of the more common political pitfalls.

**Accepting Things at Face Value.** One thing that politics shares with such diverse undertakings as psychoanalysis, the new physics, Oriental religions, and magic is the view that things aren’t as they seem. Reality occurs at many different levels. Plato captured this in The Republic in his allegory of people trapped in a cave who perceive moving shadows on the wall to be reality since that is all they have ever experienced. Behind this reality, of course, there is a deeper reality of three-dimensional objects passing in front of a light, casting the shadows that fall on the wall. The Republic, incidentally, is not only a great philosophical work; it is also a political statement. The Greeks—inventors of democracy—did not perceive politics as a shameful thing.

Good politicians are adept at penetrating through the superficial to identify the real issues. For example, the office head says he wants to automate the office to increase productivity. The astute project manager who knows the boss well may recognize that what the boss really wants is a modern-looking facility—an office filled with machines that hum rather than machines that clunk. This knowledge provides the project manager with important insights that increase the probability of project success.

**Insensitivity to Political Realities.** Some people have the political finesse of a bull in a china shop. Their primary trait is to make waves politically through their actions. To them, concern for the political consequences of their actions is overridden by a philosophy of “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!” Frequently, these individuals fall into the trap of not making much effort to do needed political spadework before they carry out their undertakings. Consider the case of the project manager who appointed a twenty-three-year-old hotshot as a task leader in charge of a group of people in their forties and fifties. When warned that the age differential between the task leader and the staff might create morale problems for the project team, he responded, “I don’t care. These old-timers will be gone in a few years. We’ve got to give our young blood the chance to learn how to manage effectively.” His goal to speed up the professional development of young staff may have been admirable. However, his insensitivity to the views of the older project team members ultimately led to a revolt that made the life of the twenty-three-year-old so miserable that he soon left the company. Had the project manager done a bit of political spade-work, he might have softened the team opposition to the young manager, or else he might have seen the futility of putting a youngster in charge of old hands.

**The Hyperpolitician.** Sometimes project workers can get into trouble by being too political. These individuals thrive on gossip and behind-the-scenes manipulation. They hold no firm views on anything, preferring to bend with the prevailing political currents of the organization. They are, in fact, a cartoon caricature of the weasely politician.

The problem is that in playing the role of the stereotypical politician, they are not being politically effective. Their political machinations are transparent to all. The ultimate goal of effective politicians is to influence others to do their bidding, not to engage in backslapping and backstabbing on a large scale. More often than not the ability to influence others requires subtlety and quiet appreciation of what others need, want, and feel. Hyperpoliticians lack this subtlety.
Hyperpoliticians can get into trouble in a number of ways. For example, through their blatant political maneuverings, they may lose the respect of their fellow workers, who may perceive them as lacking substance. This will ultimately limit their career development and their ability to get others to cooperate with them. Another common pitfall facing hyperpoliticians is that their political maneuverings may backfire on them. The alliance they make may come apart so that yesterday’s ally becomes today’s enemy. Furthermore, yesterday’s enemy is likely to remain today’s enemy as well, leaving them with few friends.

*The Hypopolitician.* Diametrically opposed to the hyperpolitician is the hypopolitician. Whereas the former pursues too much of a good thing, the latter underperforms politically. Hypopoliticians eschew politics for a number of reasons. Some see it as an unprincipled undertaking, and they do not want to be sullied by it. Others view it as silly and demeaning and avoid politics for fear of being branded as superficial. Still others who have a natural tendency toward introversion are uncomfortable with the demands for extraverted behavior required of a politician.

The big problem facing hypopoliticians is that they are either avoiding or ignoring something that will definitely affect them. Politics on projects is inevitable owing to the very nature of projects and the environment in which they are carried out. By understanding politics and developing basic political skills, hypopoliticians can improve their project performance. By avoiding politics, they have diminished the degree of control they can exercise over their projects.

A Guide to Action

Up until now, the discussion has concentrated on exploring the general nature of politics on projects. At this point, we turn our attention to a program of action, where we address the question: What do we need to do to become more effective politically? ‘The approach offered here is a four-step undertaking:

**Step 1: Develop a Positive Attitude Toward Politics**

A principal theme of this chapter is that politics is inevitable on projects, so we might as well learn to live with it and to use our knowledge to become more effective managers. We must dispel the notion that politics is an inherently sleazy or frivolous activity and should recall that it is fundamentally concerned with achieving goals through accommodation and influence. Inasmuch as we rarely have direct control over much of anything on our projects, it behooves us to become masters of accommodation and influence in order to gain some control over our efforts so that we can achieve our objectives.

**Step 2: Lay a Solid Foundation for Political Action by Developing a Base of Authority**

A fundamental problem facing project managers is that they have responsibility without authority. As we have seen, the reason for the absence of authority is that project managers typically do not own the resources they work with. Instead, their resources are borrowed.

Why is authority important? Because it provides us with the capacity to get others to do our bidding. Without authority we have no clout, no leverage over our staff and colleagues: Without authority, we must depend upon the good will of others to get the job done. We are not really in control of our project.
Clearly, a major objective of effective project managers should be to develop a base of authority. This authority base, coupled with an awareness of the environment in which they operate (discussed in Step 3), will give them the fundamental skills and resources needed to navigate the political waters of the project. There are many different kinds of authority. This chapter focuses on a handful that are relevant to most project situations. These will be discussed in detail later.

So effective political action requires the development of authority. It is authority that gives project managers a measure of influence over their staff, their bosses, and their peers. However, proper use of this authority demands that they have a good appreciation of the environment in which this authority will be applied. This brings us to the third step that must be undertaken to develop good political skills: the development of a good sense of the environment in which we operate.

**Step 3: Identify Key Elements of the Environment**

In his book *The Politics of Projects* (1983), Robert Block points out that in order to operate effectively as project managers, we must have a solid grasp of the environment in which we work. An important talent possessed by all successful professional politicians is the ability to divine what is happening around them. Accordingly, his book devotes a great deal of attention to describing how to carry out a politically savvy environmental assessment. This can be achieved by addressing three basic questions:

- Who are the players?
- What are their goals?
- Who am I?

**Step 4: Define the Problem, Then Identify and Implement a Course of Action**

Steps 1 through 3 have prepared the political groundwork that enables project managers to factor important political considerations into their decisions. Only now are they ready to offer solutions to problems. Unfortunately, most project managers skip Steps 1 through 3 and begin the decision-making process at Step 4. That is, they define the problem and begin offering solutions before they have an appreciation of the political issues that underlie the matters they are addressing.

Having done their political spadework, project managers will have a different perspective on the situation facing them than they otherwise would have had. The real nature of the problems facing them will look different when viewed through political spectacles than when political issues are ignored. What originally may have seemed to be a straightforward technical matter is now seen as something more complex, something fraught with traps and hidden obstacles. Armed with their knowledge of the political landscape, managers are in a good position to blaze a trail through the thicket.

Of course, mere awareness of key issues is not enough. Effective political action requires that project managers use their awareness effectively. They must *behave* in a politically appropriate manner. For example, they must know when to employ finesse in their dealings with others and when to use a club. They must avoid gaffes such as saying the wrong things to the wrong people at the wrong time. They must develop a good sense of timing, knowing when to introduce new initiatives and when to pull back. They must identify how much pressure they can *apply to pursue* an objective, being sure not to be too
aggressive or too timid.
Building Authority

Over the years I have been maintaining a list of different kinds of authority project staff employ. Each time I come across a new form, I add it to the list. The full list has some thirty distinct kinds of authority that I have identified. Many of these border on the trivial or are counterproductive, so I offer here an abridged list.

**Formal Authority**

People who are new to project management and technical people who see the world as governed by clearly defined rules tend to depend heavily upon formal authority. They believe that the very status of project manager confers upon them a substantial degree of authority. They see themselves as bosses. They expect others to recognize their authority and to respond to it appropriately.

Unfortunately, this is not how organizations work in the real world. Formal authority often is not very helpful to project managers unless it is accompanied by what is called *borrowed authority*. That is, for formal authority to be effective, it must be closely associated with the will of someone who is an obviously powerful player—typically someone in a high position in the organizational hierarchy. When this condition exists, the requests of the project manager can be interpreted as requests of the powerful player. Going against the project manager is in effect going against the will of someone with clout.

**Technical Authority**

Technical people tend to view the world through a prism of technical competence. The value of their bosses, colleagues, and subordinates is often measured in terms of their perceived intelligence and technical abilities. A great source of frustration for technical staff is to work for someone who they feel is a technical lightweight. They may be distressed that this individual’s lack of know-how is hampering their efforts. They may also resent that they are subordinate to someone whom they perceive to be inferior to them intellectually.

The implications of the technical ethos are clear: project managers working directly with technical staff must possess some degree of technical authority if they are to earn the respect of the staff. It should be noted that this reality extends beyond the purely technical environment of scientists and engineers. Accountants, marketers, attorneys—any staff members with finely developed skills—require a fairly high level of technical competence in their supervisors. When such technical authority is absent, it is easy for staff to dismiss the efforts and desires of their bosses and colleagues with “Don’t take him seriously because he isn’t all that sharp technically.”

Technical authority is not achieved easily. The expertise that underlies it is gained through education and experience over an extended period of time. If we do not have it when we assume our project responsibilities, we face a disadvantage that cannot be remedied easily.

**Charismatic Authority**

People who possess charismatic authority are able to get others to do their bidding through the force of their personality. The benefits of possessing some measure of charismatic authority are obvious. A major
benefit is that charisma can serve as an important component of leadership. Through the sheer force of personality, the charismatic leader may be able to get project staff to commit themselves more fully to the project—that is, to work long hours, to take risks they normally would avoid, and to be creative in problem solving.

There are two common problems with charismatic authority. First, when things go wrong—as they often do on projects—project staff may come to question the basis of this authority and may perceive the charismatic leader as a master of form who lacks substance. The same charisma that serves as the basis of managerial strength may become an object of derision.

Second, it is not clear how project managers can develop charisma. Some argue that it is an inherent component of personality—that you either have it or you don’t. Others maintain that the fundamental elements of charisma can be learned. Most likely, it is not an either/or situation. That is, some people can acquire certain charismatic traits through study and practice, whereas others are going to be hopelessly uncharismatic no matter how many hours they spend trying to learn how to win friends and influence people.

**Purse-String Authority**

Those who control resources can parlay this into a significant source of authority. With purse-string authority we face a classic carrot-and-stick reward situation: those who cooperate with us are rewarded by gaining access to needed resources. Those who do not are denied these resources. Clearly, there is strong incentive here for our staff and colleagues to see things our way.

The big problem with purse-string authority is that most project managers have little control over resources. The people assigned to their projects are borrowed resources who report to other managers. In addition, they often have only marginal control of their budgets.

Having said this, I would like to add that the picture is not as bleak as it may seem. With a little imagination, project managers and staff can see that they control more resources than they might think. For example, they have a measure of control over one of the most precious of all resources: *time*. They can reward the hardest workers with time off. (As one of my colleagues at a Fortune 50 company quipped, “To reward their good behavior, I occasionally give my finest workers a Saturday off from work.”) They may also be able to adjust staff schedules for the convenience of individual workers.

Project managers also control work assignments. As a reward for effective work, the best workers can be given the most challenging assignments. To the extent that project managers regulate the allocation of equipment (for example, computers, photocopy machines, and fax machines), this can be seen as a resource to be employed. The rewards and punishments that can be employed by project managers to build authority are discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven, which looks at team building in a matrix environment.

**Bureaucratic Authority**

The essence of bureaucratic authority is captured in the words of Lyndon Johnson, who was one of the most effective politicians in the U.S. Congress. He advised, “Learn how the system works so that you can
work the system.” The great appeal of this form of authority is that with a little effort, anyone can develop it. The basis of bureaucratic authority is knowing the rules by which the organization runs and using this knowledge to achieve desired objectives”. It is common knowledge that in a parliamentary debate, the individuals who have mastered Robert’s Rules of Order have an edge over those who have not. Similarly, those who have mastered the rules of the organization have an edge over those who are only marginally aware of these rules.

What are the rules that should be mastered? They come in a great many varieties. There are rules for the hiring and firing of personnel, rules governing the types of equipment that can be acquired, procurement rules, contract rules, budget-cycle rules, ethics rules, leave-time rules, rules impinging upon our personal conduct outside the office... rules, rules, rules. Most of us view these rules as impediments to doing a good job. We have minimal tolerance for them and follow them with little or no enthusiasm—we may even ignore them outright. We do not appreciate how with a little study, we can turn these rules to our advantage. To see this, consider the following example.

Emily Ando was overwhelmed with the administrative chores associated with the project she was managing. She was spending more time filling out time sheets, budget reports, requests for tuition remission, performance appraisals, and so on than she was doing active project work. She went to her boss, Maureen Reilly, and told her of her problem. She asked Ms. Reilly for administrative help. Ms. Reilly said she would see what she could do.

One month later, Emily still had no help. She went to Ms. Reilly and reminded her of her plight. It was clear that Ms. Reilly had forgotten about Emily’s request. Emily pleaded once again for administrative help, and once again she received assurances from Ms. Reilly that she would look into the matter. Two weeks later, Emily stopped Ms. Reilly in the hallway to inquire about progress in obtaining administrative assistance. Ms. Reilly was vague in her response. Emily was getting nowhere.

By chance, the same day that Emily had her last encounter with Ms. Reilly, she ate lunch with a budget officer who complained to her about the increase in his workload now that the end of the fiscal year was approaching. “Suddenly everyone is worried about the money they haven’t spent this year. They know that if they don’t spend it they lose it.” Emily knew practically nothing about the budgeting process in her organization, so she had her companion explain it to her briefly. She learned that a department’s unspent money was returned to the general fund at the end of the fiscal year.

When she returned to her office, she immediately telephoned Jack Marx, who maintained Ms. Reilly’s department budget and who was on good terms with Emily. She asked him about the department’s budget status, explained her need to him, and learned that there was a $15,000 line item in the budget for college interns that had not been spent in three years.

The next day, she met with Ms. Reilly and told her about the intern position, and how the department would once again lose the money obligated for the position. Ms. Reilly was shocked to learn that this money was not being used by her department and immediately authorized the creation of a job slot titled “Project Administrative Intern.” Three weeks later, Emily had a young graduate student taking over the administrative duties that had plagued her so.

By gaining knowledge of how the budget system worked in her organization, Emily Ando was able to
have her will prevail. Whether she recognized it or not, she was behaving in a politically effective manner.
Other Sources of Authority

The five sources of authority discussed so far do not exhaust the list of the kinds of authority project managers can try to develop. However, they do encompass the most common types of authority that project staff are likely to encounter. Other sources of authority include the following.

Authority Based on Competence. I put this at the top of the list because it promotes my view that one of the most powerful weapons individuals have is their competence. My experience suggests that people who are very good at what they do achieve a level of respect that translates into power. Highly competent individuals add value to their organizations. They make their managers and colleagues look good. People ignore them or mistreat them at their peril. They epitomize the maxim “Nothing succeeds like success.”

Follow-Through Authority. One element of competence is the capacity to actually do what you promise. Follow-through is a scarce commodity. I have asked several hundred managers, “Of the promises made to you over the past year, what percent were actually kept?” Answers typically range from 5 to 20 percent. One company I worked with in the 1970s was populated with highly talented scientists, most of whom had earned Ph.D.’s from world-class universities. The president of this company told me that the single greatest frustration he faced was the fact that “despite their considerable talent, our people can’t seem to bring things to closure.”

Imagine the power of being perceived as a person who keeps his or her promises!

Authority Based on Trust. Managers who can keep a confidence, who avoid the sordid aspects of politics, and who function consistently according to well-defined standards can develop a strong measure of authority based on the trust others put in them. Too often, people operate according to what is expedient. Those who resist expedient solutions, even when this may lead to short-term discomfort, are a minority of the general population. If their general trustworthiness is recognized, they are powerful.

Management by Intimidation. Sad to say, there is a place for occasional cage rattling in project management. Workers who consistently come to the office late and leave early might respond positively to managers who are not afraid to raise the decibel level of their voices. Vendors who have been promising for three months that a crucial part is in the mail might actually deliver the part in response to explicit threats of negative action. However, as a dominant approach, management by intimidation seldom is effective. In the long run, it is a de-motivator. Furthermore, it breeds resentment, so those who live by the sword should be prepared to die by the sword.

Authority Based on Physical Appearance. Many studies have demonstrated that how you look helps define the perception other people have of you. Each year thousands of bright young executives spend a substantial portion of their incomes in an attempt to “dress for success.” Actually, the issue is not whether the Rolex watch you recently bought will lead to a promotion. Rather, it is that you should be sensitive to what is considered an appropriate appearance in a given circumstance. The owner of a health spa is not going to inspire confidence in the efficacy of her weight reduction program if she herself is grossly overweight. A biker wearing a three-piece Brooks Brothers suit will be viewed with suspicion by his Hell’s Angels colleagues. In many software shops, a plaid flannel shirt, blue jeans, biker boots, a beard and a ponytail are standard fare for programmers. This same ensemble would raise eyebrows in the boardroom. The point is, project staff should recognize that their physical demeanor has an impact upon
their authority. They have the power to increase or diminish their authority through their personal grooming habits and their sartorial choices.

**Authority of the Initiative.** Back when I was chairman of the Management Science Department at George Washington University, I found myself in a position closely akin to what project managers face. I had ultimate responsibility for the actions of a large number of tenured professors, adjunct faculty, doctoral teaching fellows, and office administrative-staff (sixty people in all), yet I had no direct control over any of them. In my department, the department chair is not a boss but rather a servant of the department, an enabler who allows things to run smoothly. I found quickly that the best way for me to establish authority over my flock was to initiate things. I alerted faculty to the availability of grants and contracts and helped them write proposals; I offered clerical assistance to faculty and graduate students who were serious about publishing their research results; I raised money to purchase desktop computers for all the faculty and some of the doctoral students. Through these initiatives, I operated in a proactive fashion. The targets of my actions were put into a reactive mode. I initiated, they responded. This served me well as the basis of my authority. It also served my department well in that faculty, staff, and graduate students got the support they needed to operate more effectively.

Similarly, project managers can undertake initiatives to strengthen their authority. For example, they may request staff to suggest better ways to carry out tasks, present new project ideas to their bosses, or provide functional managers with suggestions on how to do their jobs better. In taking the initiative, they operate proactively, placing others in a reactive posture. With initiative comes a certain measure of control.

For this approach to work, the initiatives that are undertaken must be sound and achievable. They must capture the imaginations of the individuals to whom they are directed. If they are introduced properly and are well received, they will confer upon the individual introducing them an aura of leadership.

**Crisis Authority.** In Chapter Three, I mentioned that some of my Japanese students had commented that a common way to establish authority in Japanese organizations is to announce crises. For example, it may be a Friday afternoon, and the project team members are ready to return home for a weekend with the family. Just before they are scheduled to leave, the project manager rushes breathlessly into the room and describes a major crisis that has just arisen. In order to meet this crisis, the team members will have to stay late for work this evening and are expected to work on Saturday and Sunday as well.

Crisis authority is commonly employed in the East. Even in the West, the occasional raising of a crisis can be an effective way to build authority. A well-motivated team will rise to the challenge and will be willing to sacrifice some of their personal lives for the good of the project. However, as a long-term strategy, the continual raising of crises is bound to fail. Westerners are willing to go only so far to meet the needs of the team. Their individualism requires that their personal needs take priority over the team’s needs. A manager who is constantly dealing with crises is perceived to be out of control.

**Old Boy Network.** Many of my students tell me that an important source of authority in their organizations is not what they know, but whom they know. They are, of course, describing what has come to be known as the “old boy network.” In this era of sensitivity to gender-specific language, some of my female colleagues talk about “the Sisterhood.” Actually, what is being described here transcends sexual stereotyping. The key point is that decisions are made to a great degree on the basis of personal connections.
I don’t see anything inherently wrong with these personal networks as long as their influence is moderate. They are one of the many communications channels existing in a typical organization. They may enable the organization to get things done when formal communications channels become clogged. We all belong to some personal networks. We should use our connections when doing so helps us to achieve our objectives. These personal networks become a problem when they are the dominant mechanism by which actions are carried out. When this occurs, they no longer are simply another communication channel. In fact, they lead to the repression of the free flow of information since they become the only meaningful communication channel.

Other forms of authority that have come to my attention include name-dropping, weaseling, mothering, blackmailing, mentoring, and tendering. I’ll leave it to the reader’s imagination to deduce what these forms of authority entail.

**Using Authority Effectively**

It should be recalled that the whole purpose of developing authority is to have our will prevail over others in an environment where we have little clout. For this to happen, we must develop several bases of authority. Being strong in only one area is not enough. For example, if all we possess is technical authority, we run the risk of being branded as narrow-focused techno-nerds. Or if all we have is charismatic authority, we may develop a reputation for possessing a great deal of fluff and little substance.

In respect to authority, the old adage about “more is better” holds true. Effective project managers should develop as many bases of authority as possible. This should be done consciously. Project managers should periodically—say, once a month—ask themselves, “What can I do to strengthen my base of authority?” Then they should go through the list of the various sources of authority to identify those areas where they can strengthen themselves. They should ask questions such as: How can I build up my formal authority? My technical authority? My bureaucratic authority?