

Responding to a disconnected project team ¹

Yogi Schulz

Has the project team you are managing zoned out, become unresponsive and careless? Many events can kill the morale and commitment of project teams.

What can you do as the project manager to resuscitate your team and position it to complete your project successfully?

In all the situations below, you, as the project manager, will have to take deliberate steps to reenergize the team members. Usually, your encouragement efforts will improve team members' attitude and productivity. In a few cases, your efforts will have little or no impact. In those cases, you will have to remove the person from the project team. Keeping low morale and perhaps toxic individuals hanging around will only infect others. Never believe that someone is so critical that you can't remove them.

Watch for these signs that indicate team members have lost interest.

Stopped pushing back

When team members stop pushing back, it is not a sign of agreement but a sign of disengagement. Silence means they have stopped caring, not that they have come around to agree with the project goal and approach.

Lost their curiosity

As team curiosity fades, their questions disappear. Meetings shift from creative explorations of possible solutions to issues to cursory status reporting.

Started criticisms

Team members engage in whispered criticism of others, the project and various stakeholders. Negative spin replaces a positive outlook and mutual encouragement.

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Prioritized safety

The team prioritizes safety over innovation. Bold ideas become scarce. They're replaced by cautious emails. As risk tolerance drops, so does motivation.

Let standards slip

The standard of work starts to decline quietly. Where they once obsessed over every detail, good enough or barely defensible fit-for-purpose now replaces what used to be great.

Withdrew from participation

They withdraw from active participation, both visibly and emotionally. Even when they are physically present, their silent presence can no longer be felt in the room.

Not celebrating wins

Team victories, often milestone achievements, no longer elicit excitement. Where they once felt the high of shared success, wins now pass by without much reaction. When people stop sharing in success, they've tuned out emotionally.

Stopped laughing

The entertaining jokes, the informal banter and lightness fade away. When joy leaves the room, it is usually because commitment left earlier.

Became bureaucratic

They begin to focus more on process than on purpose. It becomes easier to complete forms or follow checklists than to care about real outcomes. Bureaucracy becomes a convenient shield to cover up mediocre work.

Lost their energy

The energy stops flowing among team members. Where they once lifted each other, now the room tries unsuccessfully to lift them.

Talked about the past

Their language shifts toward nostalgia and away from today's challenges. They tell more memorable stories about what was and offer fewer ideas about what could be.

Stopped raising issues

They no longer surface issues or raise concerns. When people stop sharing problems, they are not protecting the team; they are protecting their exit plan.

Conclusion

Many events can kill the morale and commitment of project teams. When project managers take action, typically through one-on-one discussions, to reverse the difficulties, projects can still succeed. Letting these problems fester can lead to project failure.

About the Author



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Yogi Schulz has over 40 years of experience in Information Technology across various industries. Yogi works extensively in the petroleum industry, selecting and implementing financial, production revenue accounting, land & contracts, and geotechnical systems. He manages projects driven by changes in business requirements, technology opportunities, and mergers and acquisitions. His specialties include IT strategy, web strategy, and systems project management.

Mr. Schulz regularly speaks to industry groups and writes a regular column for Engineering.com and for EnergyNow.ca. He has written for Microsoft.com and the Calgary Herald. His writing focuses on project management and IT developments of interest to management. Mr. Schulz served on the Board of Directors of the PPDM Association for 20 years, until 2015. He can be contacted at yogischulz@outlook.com

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