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BY TOM SULLIVAN :: PHOTO BY MARTIN BEDDALL

RIVAL tactics

NO PROJECT IS IMMUNE
FROM CONTROVERSY. BUT
PROPER PREPARATION CAN
REDUCE THE CHANCES
OF A MELTDOWN.

no one wants to be at the center of a project controversy, but sometimes it's just part of the job. That's when a company's reaction time can prevent a controversy from turning into a full-blown crisis. Unfortunately, proactive planning doesn't seem to be the norm.

"Given the amount of media coverage on companies mired in controversy, it's amazing that more do not prepare for it happening," says Martin Barlebo, partner at Holm Kommunikation A/S, a communications consultancy in Copenhagen, Denmark. "It's a bit like insurance policies. People think that crises only happen to others."

Ah, if that were only the case. But any company that's found itself in an unwanted spotlight knows differently. And it has also probably learned, albeit the hard way, that it helps to build firewalls and to include rigorous stakeholder analysis. Taking a deep dive into all the possible agendas of all the project players can help companies prepare for most controversies, Mr. Barlebo explains.

"Once you have identified potential opposition to the project, you need to

engage with key stakeholders," he says. "You make friends with experts and opinion leaders and present your project's risks and safeguards. This helps to create informed allies to support your project when journalists are looking for comment. You may also choose to talk to potential opponents, which can help in preparing for criticism later on."

An even better option is to distance the project from danger and controversy right from the outset, says George M. Church, Ph.D., professor of genetics at Harvard University Medical School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

Dr. Church is the project leader for the school's Personal Genome Project, which aims to map the genes and medical and non-medical traits of 100,000 volunteers. The project is seen as a test case for a range of technological, ethical and legal issues surrounding the role of genetics in healthcare and insurance.

Needless to say, it's the kind of project that could have been a minefield of controversy, so the team took a different tack than others in similar situations have tried.

"One of the ways you get controversy in projects like this is by inviting it. Some groups seem to like controversy, taking the view that any news is good

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—Martin Barlebo, Holm Kommunikation A/S, Copenhagen, Denmark

news, but that did not seem like an appealing model to me,” says Dr. Church.

Instead, the team built in some preventive measures aimed squarely at defusing criticism and controversy. For example, all volunteers—who must have a vested interest in genetics—must score 100 percent on an online genetics test to demonstrate that they are fully aware of the project’s goals and the risks involved, including the lack of a guarantee of anonymity.

As an added defensive maneuver, the project leaders took into account criticism of other genetics projects that have attracted controversy in the past.

“Topics such as abortion, cloning, invasion of privacy or endangering health or employment have clearly become recurring themes over the years, and if you’re going to touch on them then you’d better have a plan,” says Dr. Church. “Yet all the same, some researchers do not bother to distance themselves from these topics—they don’t make it clear enough that they are not involved with them.”

TAKING FLAK

Not all project managers have the luxury of planning for controversy.

Take Pierre-Yves Gerbeau, who came onto the beleaguered Millennium Experience project when it was on the brink of collapse. Two months after the unsuccessful launch of the show at the Millennium Dome in London, England, Mr. Gerbeau was brought in as the CEO to turn around the failing project.

It didn’t look particularly promising.

Underwritten by the British government, the project budget had run over by hundreds of millions of pounds. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair famously had claimed the show would be “a triumph of confidence over cynicism, boldness over blandness, excellence over mediocrity,” but later admitted that the project had not lived up to expectations.

here they come

Even a whiff of project controversy can bring on a pack of reporters in search of a scoop. Before it spirals out of control, project leaders need to stanch the flow of negative press—quickly.

“The moment a crisis hits, it’s very hard to do anything about it because public opinion has already decided that you’ve done something wrong,” says Martin Barlebo, Holm Kommunikation A/S. “However, you need to do a number of things, such as informing your shareholders of the issues, answering media questions and responding to factual errors in reporting.”

But that simply doesn’t happen in many cases.

“What you see in many media crises is that the company is unable to react during the first few days,” he says. “They either say nothing or make false claims that later have to be retracted.”

Mishandling a controversy and being evasive often creates a second, more damaging crisis, says Mr. Barlebo.

“You need to be able to respond in the first day or two after a negative news story appears,” he says. “Otherwise it starts to spread from one media to another and into national and international media.”

Companies should plan for the worst before it even happens.

“It’s important to imagine what your project would look like if a tabloid newspaper emblazoned a nasty story about it all over the front page,” he explains.

Still, there’s only so much a project manager can do.

“A project manager can only say what can be done for the project to reach its goals, communicate the risk to the sponsor and then implement it,” says Tom Johns, Ph.D., PMP, Business Management Consultants. “Too much firefighting with the media can make you dysfunctional.”

That's when Mr. Gerbeau stepped into the fray—and was immediately besieged.

“The thing I was not prepared for was that the project had become a political football. By the time I took over, the product was seen as irrelevant,” says Mr. Gerbeau, now chief executive of X-Leisure, an entertainment and leisure company in London.

He also hadn't expected the personal attacks directed at him in the British media.

“In the first six months, the attention shifted from the product to me. It was all about that ‘stupid Frenchman,’ and irrelevant things like my accent, the size of my belly and lies about my background,” Mr. Gerbeau says. “But to take over leadership of a controversial project, you need to accept ownership and accountability. And that means that you become the target of the media. It can actually be a good strategy to deflect attention on yourself while you're fixing the project—even though it's not pleasant.”

Under Mr. Gerbeau's management, the show attracted six million visitors, far short of the original, ambitious target of 12 million. But it was good enough to make it the largest attraction

in the country and to earn him a reputation as the man who “fixed the dome.”

Mr. Gerbeau says a number of factors contributed to the project turnaround.

“I don't think there is any plan or recipe you can use to handle troubled projects. I have an acid test, to look at the finance, the product and the people. Once those three are right, then we can go in. But it's really down to behavior,” he explains. “Even though we were under pressure and getting slaughtered by the media, I was still always open to interviews and eventually, after six months, the media reports started being more positive. You have to be totally transparent, accountable and available. And you need to over-communicate with every stakeholder.”

KEEP THE FAITH

When a project comes under fire in the media, it can exact a price on the morale of team members. The experience can pull them together, too, says Mr. Gerbeau.

Project managers need to lead by example.

“It's fine to say we're all in this together, but if you walk the talk then



right from **the start**

Controversy can be hardwired into projects from the very beginning if they're improperly scoped or have unrealistic timelines, says **Kirt Gilliland**, principal at Irving Hughes/CM, a construction management consultancy in San Diego, California, USA.

“I'm a firm believer that most projects that have issues and problems were not set up to be successful from the start. Either they weren't given enough time, enough money, enough management or the right management to be successful,” he says.

“A lot of projects go awry because the sponsors push on the schedule,” Mr. Gilliland says. “When that happens, you have to add a contingency and make them aware of the risks and what you need to do to mitigate them.”



people start looking at you differently. You need to be at the center of the aggravation and accept [being] the target of people's discontent. That way the team sees that you mean business. You're not hiding away in your office, and they can trust you."

Keeping team members on board can be particularly tough in societies with close-knit communities opposed to a controversial project, says Paul Kamgang, PMP, CEO of Africa Project Management Consulting in Douala, Cameroon.

"With projects in West Africa, the key challenge can be to keep up the morale of team members when they are being challenged by the local community," he explains. "It's important to keep focusing on why the project is worthwhile."

Some people will need convincing.

"Effective communications within the team and with stakeholders from early on in the planning process can resolve most controversies," says Mr. Kamgang. "The problems we typically encounter mostly stem from a lack of understanding of the projects' goals."

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—Pierre-Yves Gerbeau

Having a cohesive core team can help pull a project through those crisis periods, says Tom Johns, Ph.D., PMP, founder and chairman of the advisory council at Business Management Consultants, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

"The commitment of team members to each other can outweigh and transcend what the media or politicians are saying," he says. "Confidence in a controversial project improves over a period of time when you actually prove it is working." PM