

## Across The Pond: Projects, Politics and the “Bad Apple” Conundrum

By **Carl Pritchard**, US Correspondent



Every organisation has star performers. They have individuals who believe in the organisation’s mission, support its projects with zeal, and serve tirelessly in their shared interests. Every organisation also has the antithesis. Bad apples. Bad apples are those individuals who seek to subvert project goals, do disservice to the projects and serve their own interests above all else. In situations where there’s a choice between serving the greater good or themselves, they believe they are the greater good.

Project Manager Today interviewed a cross-section of project managers, to discover how to identify the challenging team members and what to do about them.

**Tharshan Sreetharan** is CEO of Learntin, a global training and consulting services company. He believes bad apples come in a couple of different flavours. There are those who worry about themselves, and those who feel compelled to give away extras. “There could be various constituents of a bad apple in a project team. One scenario which I feel is a key constituent is when any member of the team has his/her own agenda/approach and solutions and is not working towards the project/business objectives and requirements. Some of the colleagues may have a mind set to ‘gold plate’ or provide a software feature, for example, which is not what the project or client wants and so ends up not meeting the scope constraints of the project.”

Minnesota Management Consulting’s **Dean Boorman** (Principal Consultant) thinks it goes even deeper. He

suggests it’s about how they interact with the team, citing “a team member that is not living up to the most basic team norms. (i.e. showing up on time, providing updates without blaming others, listening and responding directly)”.

**Jeanine Izzo**, PMP, Chief Engagement Officer and Leadership Coach for Viage Partners says that it’s definitely about how they’re affecting others. “A bad apple is someone that is not getting their job done and/or they are affecting one or more team members in negative ways.”

And that can be disheartening. **Michael Taylor**, a PMO organisational leader, contends that such behaviours are downright demoralising. He says that the problems come from “someone who, for whatever reason, makes everything about a project more demanding. They dishearten the team by upsetting the ‘normal’ functioning of that team.”

**Salah M. Haswah**, PfMP, Senior Consultant, Bakkah Inc., concurs. He believes it’s about the team and team interaction. “It’s someone who might be working for his/her own agenda at the expense of his teammates, against the team (dynamic, flow, objective) or not doing his/her part at all for the team.” Haswah believes there are early warning signs to watch for in developing these behaviours. “The overall team performance is the first indicator that should push you to look closely at each individual to see what’s going wrong (if anything), or by getting feedback from team members about a specific team member/role/

task, or through periodic checks from time to time of each individual."

Boorman suggests it's a two-stage process as team members decay into the land of poor behaviour. "Team members are lost when they start not responding to attempts to contact them, and then when they don't attend meetings, and then the final straw is missing dates or deliverables without any status provided. They ultimately go into the 'bad apple' basket when confronted and they a) redirect to others b) give false information and c) purposely mislead other team members or, indeed, myself or executives." He believes that the first cure for the problem is to ensure that they don't start encouraging others to have similar bad behaviours. "Isolate them from information & reduce their tasks."

Before such isolation, there may be other options. **Tetyana Dusaniwskyj**, a regulatory affairs project manager, says that before working to deal with the effects, it's important to examine the causes. "I would continue the investigation to get to the root cause of the problem. In my experience, an apple may become 'bad' because of: 1) inability to perform (lack of capability, training, knowledge, skills, background, etc.) or 2) unwillingness to perform (lack of motivation). It may take an individual conversation to get to the root of the problem. If the cause is an inability to perform, I work on removing obstacles by providing additional training, assigning a mentor, adjusting the level of responsibility, changing the assignment, etc. If the cause is unwillingness, I look for a way to motivate by, for example, reevaluating/establishing personal goals, increasing the level of responsibility (in my experience, this works for young talented people who feel lack of appreciation and are simply bored at entry level positions), enrolling in professional development program or working with HR to establish additional performance incentives."

Sreetharan also believes in a more inclusive approach. "I would first have a one-on-one discussion with the bad apple and help him to understand the client and project objectives further." He believes that these individuals need to see the influences of their behaviour. He contends that it's important to "explain the constraints on the project such as schedule, cost, scope and the associated risks if he/she works toward his own agenda. Then, I would take steps to remedy the solution by having more frequent catch-ups to ensure the resource understands the objectives of the project and works in greater alignment with the team."

Taylor believes project managers need to be more effective at separating the problem from the individual. "The first course of action is to separate the person from their behaviour. In the end, it is not about right and wrong. Behaviours which may not fit one team and may impact a team negatively may be a fit and even rewarded on another team. So, this becomes about fit and impact. Speak to the person about their specific behaviour. Be specific that it is the behaviour you are looking to eliminate because



it is negatively impacting the team and does not fit. It's not them that you are looking to remove from the team, it is the behaviour. Let them know why the behaviour is wide of the mark and what the impact is. Then, let them know what behaviours fit the team and see if you can work on it together."

Nonetheless, since the actions of a single bad actor influence the entire team, Haswah suggests that the entire team needs to be involved in the solution. "Gather the team, clarify their overall objective and purpose, assert on each team member their role and importance and how they contribute to the overall project." He contends that this is an effective "indirect way to communicate to the bad apple, and sometimes they can take the hint and start working on themselves. This way, you avoid embarrassment for introvert personalities and also might be able to help someone who wasn't aware of their own behaviour or importance within the team."

Dusaniwskyj believes that the team definitely plays a role here. "My personal recommendation would be to give a second chance to anyone, to a certain extent; however, I would solicit the team decision."

In watching team behaviours where single bad actors work to subvert the goals of the organisation, the question often surfaces: Can this individual be redeemed? Boorman suggests that if the negative actions continue by the bad apple, or he/she fails to contribute, it's time for harsh action. In Dean's words, "Backfill over them. Move them on to 'greener pastures.'" But he points out that there are times when we don't know what's going on in a bad apple's world. "There are times when environmental factors are affecting them." He suggests they may have health issues, family matters or skill deficiencies that are otherwise undetected. Boorman believes that it's important to move swiftly and effectively. "Take actions quickly; don't dilly dally or play a 'Hope & Wish' game."

Sreetharan believes there's still hope when a bad apple is discovered. "In most cases they can be redeemed if they have the right attitude. However, there could be exemptions, mainly when the bad actors have been in the same company or project for a long time and tend to think they know better than the client or rest of the team. In this case, it's best to take corrective actions such as allowing the person to be deallocated from the project for a period of time." He believes that effective actions like these open the door to ensure that the rest of the team doesn't start suffering from the same fate. He says it's a matter of "regular coaching and mentoring the team through frequent interactions, discussions and information sharing".

Jim Hannon, a senior consultant at NeuEon, concurs that the ideal is to try to salvage the team member. "The move

to redeem them can be exasperating. The employee needs to be coached to understand that their behaviour is not acceptable - and not just by the PM but the PM and their direct manager. If the behaviour is addressed and a plan is put in place, you can salvage the employee."

"If you are looking to the person to redeem themselves, you may be more lenient and tolerant of the behaviour," offers Taylor. "It's sort of like cheering on the underdog. Behavior modification is an internal, personal, process. As a leader, a PM needs to outline clearly what behaviours are a fit for the team. In the end, it is up to the person to decide if the effort to change is worth the effort to be part of the team. There isn't any 'redemption'. Merely, 'can they want to change enough to fit in on the team?' If they cannot, then reassignment is an option."

In this entire discussion about bad behaviour, one key component is still at its core—how do project managers encourage the behaviours they really want? Izzo says that a lot of it ties to expectations. "With clear expectations, respect, accountability and support it is pretty easy to put a healthy shine on those good apples."

Hannon says that if you take care of the bad apples, the good ones take care of themselves. "In my experience, the team knows a bad apple and wants that person to be 'fixed' or taken off the team. If this is not done professionally then the behaviour appears to be condoned and it can spread quickly."

Haswah believes that it boils down to people treating their team members like people and professionals. "Sparing your own time to care closely for individuals in the team in the situations they need you will create a good leadership example." From this perspective, it's about letting them know they're appreciated. "Show how the team members add value to the project and prove good management is taking place. These things can have a significant impact on team motivation and performance. While you are taking some individuals case by case, an overall evaluation of team performance should always remain in check to ensure proper motivation (emotional) & guidance (logical) of the project team. Human beings are, after all, an integration of both emotions & logic. You can't treat these separately; when you manage to address and consider both elements you can have best possible results out of the team."

In exploring these approaches to team members with both positive and negative behaviours, it's intriguing to look at them in the bright daylight of the daily news cycle and the drama of team challenges at the local, national and international level. The professionals interviewed here drew many conclusions that would serve any team-challenged leader well. Assume positive intent. Share responsibility. Communicate clearly. Clarify the distinction between effective and ineffective behaviour. Lead. And if the team members simply can't follow the lead? Invite them to pursue other opportunities.