

The Power of Permission

By Donna Fitzgerald

“It is better to beg forgiveness than ask permission... Better to regret something you have done than something you haven’t done.”

Who gives you permission to do your job? You? Your boss? Your company? If your answer is that the company hired you but **you** define how you do your job, odds are you are working in a company that follows the concepts of Anglo-Saxon Law. On the other hand if you feel that your company tells you specifically how you can do your job you’re most likely working in a company that follows the tenets of Roman law.

Roman law is based on the concept that permission to do something must be expressly given from a superior to a subordinate. In an attempt to keep an iron lock on all of its citizenry and extended territories, Rome endeavored to keep order by applying the principle that unless something was specifically and clearly authorized, it was, by defacto standard, forbidden. In contrast, Anglo-Saxon law held the opposite perspective – anything that was not expressly forbidden was implicitly acceptable.

Companies tend to follow one or the other of these patterns in their management philosophy. PMs working in Anglo-Saxon law companies accept that the amount of power they have is directly up to them; whereas PMs in Roman law companies may feel powerless because they believe their companies haven’t embraced the PM-centric management style required to give them the express permission to do whatever is needed to get the job done.

Since most of us can do our jobs quite happily in an “Anglo-Saxon Law” company I’d like to spend the rest of this article giving some suggestions for how to either get or give yourself permission to do your job in a “Roman Law” company using one or all of the three techniques listed below:

- Do what needs to be done and accept the consequences (“damn the torpedoes”).
- Do what needs to be done in a manner that does not draw attention to what you are doing (stealth PM).
- Do what needs to be done because it is consistent with the will of the people (power of the following).

“Damn the Torpedoes, Full Speed Ahead”

This technique entails simply deciding that you have the power to make a highly visible change in how things are usually done on a project without someone above you telling you it is all right. Your degree of risk with this technique lies in the visibility of the difference between your way and what the company considers the normal way. In general this technique works but it is usually a costly career move, even in cultures that claim they are open to new ideas.

Having taken this approach myself a number of times with varying degrees of success, and watched others struggle as well I’d like to offer two caveats:

- 1. Only try this on a project that offers immediate and visible results.**

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I once executed a project for a client that needed to be completed within 90 days of the start date. Given this short time frame we couldn't follow the approach the client had used on a similar project, where they'd taken eight months to do 20% of what we had to do in 90 days. I found myself in the unenviable position of looking a senior VP in the eye and saying that, although I understood his preferences, unless he could assure me that his methods would allow us to complete the project on time, we'd have to stick with the plan I'd laid out. At the successful conclusion of the project, the same VP looked at me and said, "I don't think I'm happy about the way you did things but it's too late to complain – you're done."

Most of the time, company management is not stupid—results are important to them. If turning a "blind eye" for a little while achieves their desired results, they're willing to do it—especially since they can always reprimand the PM for the approach at the end of the project, as evidenced by my story above. The situation can also play out very differently (and very disastrously) if you ignore the second caveat.

2. Make sure your goal and the company's goal are the same (i.e. take the right beach.)

At a previous employer, I saw a rather painful example of failure to take this caveat into account. The worldwide program VP for the company's top initiative made the decision that he was going to accomplish the goal of integrating the company's myriad of data centers into one by using all the techniques of formal project management. While this might have sounded like a worthy goal and a solid way to achieve success, it was anathema to the company's culture (not all Roman law based companies have formal process cultures – they just have to demand adherence to their norm.)

Five months into the project (with the due date looming seven months ahead), Europe was still in the planning phase because the country managers wouldn't submit acceptable plans. Rather than compromise with them or do something different to allow the project to move forward, the Program VP chose to stick to his guns and demanded that things be done RIGHT, even if they had to be done more slowly. Unfortunately for him the CEO disagreed and fired him and his project team at the next review meeting.

The truly sad thing about the situation above was that it was a classic case of forgetting the second caveat of taking the right beach. The Program VP was in a position where a "damn the torpedoes" strategy was not only completely appropriate but actually required. The CEO of the company wanted the data center consolidated and he was willing to back anything that got it done quickly no matter how many conventional rules were broken or how many toes got stepped on in the long run. The problem was the Program VP misread the signals. He understood that he was being given permission to do it his way, unfortunately he took that to mean that his way (using formal processes) became the goal in and of itself and he lost site of the real goal (beachhead) he was supposed to take.

Stealth Project Management

Of the three approaches to getting radical things done in a Roman law environment, my favorite is stealth project management. This technique works most of the time and does not cost you a verbal reprimand at the end, the way the first technique usually does.

The three caveats of stealth project management in this context are:

1. **Keep the focus on tangible results.** As long as what you're doing is working and isn't creating dissension—either on your team or with your stakeholder community—management will be happy and they won't ask you if you've done anything different from any other project manager in the company.

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2. **Don't ask and don't tell.** There's a piece of folk wisdom that restates this rather nicely, "What they don't know can't hurt them." This statement is not intended to encourage dishonest or inappropriate behavior. Project managers as a group tend to be very honest people and most of us keep management informed of the things we are doing, but there some things that can be construed as too much detail. I managed one project where we later documented for a conference presentation that we had used all the principles of complex adaptive systems theory to help us come in one time and on budget. At the conference my co-author and I were often asked how we got managements permission to use CAS techniques and our answer was we never told them and they never asked.
3. **Allow them to save face.** This caveat can be one of the most difficult to accept because project managers tend to believe that delivering results will salve anyone's pride and that a few toes probably have to be sacrificed along to the way to results. This concept is also difficult because it simply isn't natural to western culture. Placing ego and pride before achieving company goals is considered wrong in our society and yet every one of us can recount stories where that's exactly what a senior manager did. In stealth project management mode, the goal is to accomplish your purpose without causing any perceived loss of power or "face" by anyone else.

Failure to understand this last caveat can put you into "damn the torpedoes" mode and out of stealth almost without your conscious awareness. The secret for me was in understanding that in stealth mode you need to be focused whether people are satisfied with your results, not just whether or not you achieved them. I once made a VP very unhappy because I didn't allow her to be perceived as the source of all decisions on my project. I thought I was helping her by taking work off her desk (she was working 80 hrs a week as it was) and by salvaging a failing project. Her perception was that by operating with clear independence I had undermined her power.

The caveat of "saving face" is there to remind us that our sponsors, our team mates, and our customers all have their own definition of what maintains their sense of self-worth and that our definition of what's right or what's efficient should never unconsciously serve as a trump card. There may be times when we decide our judgment has to prevail but at least by taking the caveat into account we can do it consciously.

An important concept to remember when practicing Stealth Project Management is that companies that adopt a Roman law culture do so because they are inherently risk averse. The tenets of stealth project management are designed to work within the confines of a risk-averse environment by producing results, without directly confronting either the cultural or the personal imperatives.

The Power of the Following

Have you ever been asked to implement a change program by upper management and then found that no matter what you do, the people that you're selling it to aren't buying? Have you seen software projects that were "on time and on budget" die at implementation because the user community said no? These are classic example of the power of the masses to prevent something from happening. This same principle can be used in a positive manner by capitalizing on the inherent "power of the masses" to give you permission to get your project done.

The best example of this that I've seen is from a large software company. The tools division was running very late on getting the next release out for the rest of development. Normally it wouldn't have mattered but this release was going to give everyone the capability they needed to get the next generation of

features into their product. Management wasn't particularly responsive to fixing the situation (they just told everyone to wait) but that wasn't what people wanted to hear. Through a process of networking and after-hour meetings the tools team was informally doubled by volunteer resources and was able to get the project back on track and the tools into the hands of the rest of development sooner.

I want to be very clear that the example above is an unusual situation for a "Roman Law" company. It was possible only because developers as a professional community have a tradition of working on shared projects in their own time (like open source software) and therefore the concept of forming a skunk-works team wasn't without precedent. It was also possible in this situation because no one had to fill out a time card accounting for where they were spending their time.

So how can you as a project manager galvanize the Power of the Following on your own project? Begin by treating your customer as your highest priority. I'm always amazed at the number of projects where this isn't done. If no one really wants your end product, you're just one more cog in the wheel. Your project can be cut or starved without anyone but you and your team suffering. If the results of your project are *Important* to some vocal people (even if they're all "rank and file"), then everything about the priority of your project changes. In most cases, management will become more concerned about results than details. This of course doesn't mean that you'll be given a blank check but it does mean you get some maneuvering room as to how you run your project, which should have been your goal in the first place.

An additional factor that allows you to use the Power of Following lies in your ability to build a network. Even in a Roman law company there is an informal or off- org chart power structure. These are the people that others look to for direction and guidance about what's happening in the organization and how they ought to feel about any proposed changes. As a project manager you either need to get tied into this network or get someone on your project that is, in order to make sure that your project is a priority where it really counts.

Conclusion

Managing a project in an Anglo-Saxon Law based company is easy. Just get results and don't upset too many people along the way. Managing a successful project in a Roman law culture, the way you want to manage it, can be a little more difficult but it's still possible. Permission *to do* ultimately comes from inside yourself, and permission, rather than overt power, is really what you need to manage your project. Also understanding that power is given to you by those who agree to follow you – frees you to spend your time cultivating an attitude of collaboration and servant leadership, rather than bemoaning your lack of position on the company's organizational chart.

Finally, if you are still looking for permission outside of yourself to do your job in the best way you know how, then here it is:

Permission is hereby granted to be the best project manager you can be.

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