Dodging the Bullet

Inaccuracies with status-reporting as individuals and not as a team

I once worked at a major telecommunications corporation as a contractor providing software design and implementation services. For those who wrote code, the ratio of employees of the corporation to contractors was about one to one. It was common for a specific business process to consist of multiple teams of business analysts, programmers and testers where each team numbered between six and twenty, and team members were about evenly balanced with employees of the corporation and contractors. Despite working as a team, it was also typical that the team manager would request a progress report – a verbal status – from each team member.

This can cause some confusion both to management and to the team members since it is not clear whether the members consist of a team working toward a common goal. A conclusion often drawn by a team member who is asked by management to provide a personal status is that all members of the team are being compared with each other on their respective ability to stay on schedule. This can interfere not only with the cooperation necessary for team members to help each other, but also can cause an individual to report, consciously or unconsciously, an inaccurate status.

I recall a meeting at the aforementioned major telecommunications corporation, scheduled by my team manager for the purpose of determining the project status, and attended by the eight other team members. We all sat around a table where one by one the manager would inquire of each of us our respective status for completing our tasks on schedule. From previous discussions with members of my team I had suspected many of them would report being slightly behind schedule. The first person reported being on schedule. So did the second person, and so on around the table, with everyone reporting being on schedule.

I was the seventh of the eight who would get my chance to provide an individual status. By the time it was my turn, I had concluded that the first person did not want to be the first one to admit being behind schedule and was hoping one of the others on the team would take this honor. Of course, neither did anybody else want to be the first to admit this. Since the project would be late if even one person was running late, each member of the team was dodging the bullet in the hopes someone else would take the fall.

I was fairly certain that I was on schedule with my respective tasks, but considered that if I were to report this, then only one person remaining could offer this manager an accurate report that something was running behind schedule, and I was uncertain whether the final person actually was running behind. So I reported that I was running late by an estimated ten percent. The manager inquired more about this and I offered more details.

It soon became obvious to everyone else that the manager was not looking to cast blame but simply trying to determine an accurate account of where the project stood and what steps the manager might take to resolve the issues which were interfering with progress. One by one, each team member who had preceded me took the opportunity to adjust to their respective progress reports, admitting to being behind by some slight amount.

An accurate progress report had finally emerged and I recall a feeling of relief by everyone in the room upon realizing they did not need to report what each thought the manager wanted to hear. It helped all the members of the team, who could see which other team members might need assistance in completing their tasks.

The manager might have found a better way to get the information sought than to ask team members for individual statuses at a team meeting, and this would have alleviated the feeling by team members that they were not being regarded as a team but as individuals working independently of each other and, by extension, in competition with each other. In this case, each team member held a perceived fear of the consequences for reporting to management of being behind in completing assigned tasks.

W. Edwards Deming identified this fear-based behavior as one of the reasons why managers often do not get accurate answers from their subordinates, asserting:

- "Fear invites wrong figures. Bearers of bad news fare badly. To keep his job, anyone may present to his boss only good news."[1]

Deming regarded fear to be such a fundamental aspect in the pursuit of quality that it is the foundation for the 8th of his famous 14 Points:

- "8 – Drive out fear, so that everyone may work effectively for the company."[2]

Members of a team might be expected to respond more accurately when each one regards the manager as someone who is focused on the team and likely to help eliminate the constraints which cause individual tasks not to be completed when due.

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1   Deming, "The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education", 2nd edition, 1994, p. 94.
2   Deming, *Out of the Crisis,* 2000, p. 23.