



## Content, Conflicts and Consensus - Three Key Factors to look for in successful Project Management

### The need to Escalate

One of the key instruments in Project Management is a tool called “Escalation”. Escalation by a Project Manager is needed whenever roadblocks are in the way of achieving the agreed objectives of the project. Escalation means the Project Manager requires the help of a higher authority to remove those roadblocks or take an overriding decision. This higher authority can be a steering committee or the principal of the Project, but typically a person that can “pull rank” on others to make things happen. In fact, we would argue that any complex Project would require frequent escalations in order for it to be successful. If you are running such a Project and there are never any escalations, you may ask yourself what is wrong.

### Content is Key

Escalation is needed when there is disagreement. Disagreement is not a bad thing. It means people have different opinions and are actively voicing them. That is exactly what a good Project needs. It needs friction to create brilliance and that friction should come from *content driven discussions*. To set things straight: we are not looking for conflict on the personal level, obviously.

Project Managers that focus only on the process of managing resources, milestones and timelines without going in to sufficient depth of the content of the Project cannot achieve true success. Of course they need help from Subject Matter Experts but in the end they have to drive the required decisions all the way up to the next escalation level.

### Avoiding Conflict

Some people think of escalation as a bad thing. They link it to *Conflict* and define that as a situation to best avoid. Instead, people might start to look for *Consensus*, that one place where everyone would buy into. And for sure there are situations where this can be the best achievable outcome, like in geopolitical conflicts. But we are talking Project Management here, and our Project was started with a clear Business Case and clear Objectives. It is the Project Manager’s job to achieve those objectives. The consensus point might often be the mediocre point that is a far cry away from the original sought after results of the Project.

### When Consensus becomes a Problem

Consensus becomes a problem when people in the Project no longer voice their opinions and no longer participate in content driven discussions. Internal Project staff may have a hard time daring to disagree with a strong Leader. Instead they all follow that Leader blindly. Yet each individual would tell you that he or she was in total disagreement with the route the group was taking right from the start. Jerry Harvey described the phenomenon so aptly in his “Abilene Paradox” dissertation.

External Consultants face a similar challenge: do you dare to disagree with your principal or are you afraid “to bite the hand that feeds”? How can you help your principal when you do not bring your insights to the table and challenge other views?

### In Conclusion...

To achieve successful Projects we need to stay focused on the Content of the Project, we should not be afraid of Content based disagreement, we should escalate when needed and we should be aware of (too much) Consensus.