

Mario's career crisis

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In the July 2006 edition of *Project Manager Today*, Ben Johnson's "mini-case studies" column presented a (fictitious) problem faced by Mario. Mario's problem is that he is being "pushed" into a project management role after many years of being a technical "guru". The boundaries of his new role have never been explicitly defined and he is finding it difficult to cope with the demands now placed upon him.

What can he do?

Define his objectives

First, Mario must define what he wants – his own position. It is mentioned that he "realizes his role is changing", but is this what he *wants*? One of the biggest challenges with the problem faced by Mario is clarifying the issues. This can be helped by formal analysis, so let's start representing the issues using a technique called Confrontation Management.

Figure 1 shows Mario's position as "[start] manag[ing] projects" and "reduce technical contribution to projects". Shaded "boxes" mean the corresponding option is adopted, unshaded "boxes" mean it is not adopted. In this case, he is acknowledging the fact that he can't juggle both roles indefinitely.

	M
Mario	
contribute technical advice to projects	□
manage projects	■
reduce technical contribution to projects	■

Figure 1: Is this Mario's position...?

Alternatively, Mario's position might be "[continue] contributing technical advice to projects" and "[avoid] manag[ing] projects". This would obviously result in him not "reduce[ing] [his] technical contribution to projects". This position is formalized in Figure 2.

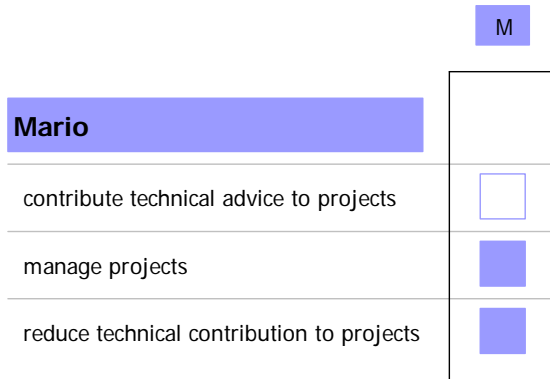


Figure 2: ...or is this Mario's position?

Let's assume that he wants to move into project management – i.e. that his position is as in Figure 1. He now needs to communicate this to senior managers. However, on doing so, he is likely to find that his attempts to gain clarity on his boundaries will force senior managers to consider their own position.

As Mario has been a key technical contributor to projects over many years, a reduction in his effort will leave holes in many existing projects. To plug these holes, project managers may have to buy-in expertise from other companies – which will, in turn, eat into profits. Consequently, project managers and senior managers would prefer Mario to continue to juggle both roles. They may also say that he should be capable of doing this – implying that he will not be considered a “star performer” in the future if he cannot shoulder his responsibilities.

The (shared) position of the senior (S) and project (P) managers is shown in Figure 3¹.

¹ The arrows in Figure 3 represent preferences between positions and the threatened outcome if people maintain their positions. Suffice it to say, the fact that they are all pointing away from Mario's position is not a good sign!

	M	t	S	P
Mario			⇒	⇒
contribute technical advice to projects	□	◇	■	■
manage projects	■	◇	■	■
reduce technical contribution to projects	■	◇	□	□
Senior managers	→			
give Mario a poor performance appraisal	□	◆	□	—
Project managers	→			
buy-in technical expertise	—	◆	□	□

Figure 3: Position of senior/project managers

This is bad for Mario. He doesn't want a poor performance appraisal – he's never had one! At this point, Mario must argue that the position of the senior/project managers is unattainable – regardless of how much they pressure him. He just cannot juggle both roles. Reference to recent crises will help him make his case.

However, this line of reasoning leaves him in the uncomfortable position of making his "threat" credible – i.e. "I will have to reduce my technical contribution – and all be damned." The threatened outcome, if everyone holds to their position, is shown in Figure 3 as column [threat] – Mario will manage projects and reduce his technical contribution (thus receiving a poor performance appraisal), requiring project managers to buy-in crucial expertise. "Forcing" a position on senior managers is not the best of ideas!

So, at the same time as making his "threat" credible, Mario must also seek to make his position more attractive to senior managers. The "tensions" revealed by the model prompt this search for creative alternatives.

One option available to Mario is to offer to mentor another technical "guru". This will involve Mario giving up some of his power-base as *the* technical resource, but it will free him to pursue the next stage of his career *and* allow more flexible resourcing of projects across the company. In order to pursue this mentor role, Mario might be able to negotiate a temporary suspension of his project management responsibilities. Other project managers may be willing to take on the temporary extra load if they know their efforts will result in the availability of more technical expertise in the long-term.

With Mario taking such a strategic lead in addressing this problem, he's unlikely to receive a poor performance appraisal.

Figure 4 illustrates this negotiated agreement. The second column is now labeled a[greement] – as opposed to [threat]!

	M	a	S	P
Mario				
contribute technical advice to projects	■	◆	■	■
manage projects	□	◇	□	□
reduce technical contribution to projects	□	◇	□	□
mentor a colleague	■	◆	■	■
Senior managers				
give Mario a poor performance appraisal	□	◇	□	□
Project managers				
buy-in technical expertise	—	◇	□	□
take on extra work	■	◆	■	■

Figure 4: Negotiated agreement

It is important that all parties' roles in the agreement are clearly defined – this is clarifying the boundaries. Using a formal model makes the agreement explicit.

Summary

Mario should:

- 1) Clarify his own position.
- 2) Make his position clear to senior (and project) managers.
- 3) Ensure that everyone understands the consequences of senior (and project) managers maintaining their (untenable) position.
- 4) Look for a creative solution that meets everyone's objectives.
- 5) Document everyone's responsibilities under the new agreement.
- 6) Utilize formal analysis to ensure clarity throughout the process.

Most internal business problems are plagued by lack of clarity. Assumptions and personal objectives are rarely acknowledged, forcing “confrontations” underground where they fester into conflicts. Even if formal models are never presented as such, the insights they can provide into delicate organizational situations can be invaluable.