Tackling the Project Approval Bikies

Project approvals the Hunter S. Thompson way

Getting new projects reviewed and approved can sometimes feel like walking into a pub full of bikies. So how do you get safely to the bar? By tackling your project approval bikies head on…

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When the late, great journalist Hunter S. Thompson took an assignment to cover life with the notorious Hell's Angels' Motorcycle Club, his colleagues told Thompson he'd never secure the Hell's Angels' cooperation - that any kind of personal relationship with them would be impossible. Unfortunately, many study teams seem to think the same way about their reviewers and assessors - that they can't or shouldn't talk to each other.

So could it be done? Could Thompson engage his enemies and achieve his goal? Yes, he could and did- and may have uncovered valuable tips for project study teams.

Thompson got a former Hell's Angel and San Francisco Chronicle journalist to introduce him to Oakland chapter president Sonny Barger. He was upfront about his presence and role as a journalist and remained close to the Angels for a year.

Tip #1: engage your assessment team as early as possible. Study teams should keep the communication lines open and keep reviewers aware of project progress; work to understand their concerns.

Of course, study teams shouldn't try to interfere with the arm's length review process. But assessors are a valuable resource for guiding a study if you discover what their sensitivities are, and if you use them as a sounding board for your project's particular difficulties. As long as both parties are clear about their roles and ethical boundaries, creating a professional dialogue can work to a study team's advantage.

Thompson took issue with adverse media reports about bikies because reports merely covered random incidents; reporters failed to provide any sociological context in which to interpret the events. Thompson decided that by working collaboratively with the Hell's Angels he could provide the context himself.

Tip #2: Provide a narrative for your findings. Don't just produce a whole lot of information without context. Provide an easily digestible narrative and construct a clear argument based on economics and sound business strategy.

It's the project's context, strategic fit with company objectives, and a well-argued business case that give meaning to all the analysis and test results. Data on its own isn't enough to provide a clear picture of a project's value. Interpret the findings to provide a compelling case for investing time and money.

Sadly, Thompson was eventually beaten to a bloody pulp by five Hell's Angels members. But why? Some bikies thought he was taking advantage of their club. Actually, Thompson didn't know these members personally and hadn't engaged with them. Which just goes to show you can't win everyone's approval with typing.

Tip #3: Don't give them a reason to beat you up! Expect your proposal to suffer a knockout blow if you are not up front about its drawbacks. Some project teams try to paper over the cracks in their reporting for fear that drawing attention to them will result in failure. If your assessment team finds one cover-up, your entire initiative will come under immediate suspicion.

Address the existing uncertainties head on, provide explanations for them, and explain how they are outweighed by the advantages. And if you don't have an immediate solution for a problem, say so.

So the moral of the story is: don't give them a reason to beat you up. Engage with your reviewers, relate to them on their terms, tell them the full story of your proposal and give them a balanced view to consider.