Dear Chief

Dismount the dead horse

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COLUMNIST

DEAR CHIEF: How can I deal with a "dead horse" project that upper management continues to fund? It isn't working and it's only sucking money out of the organization. It involves fine-tuning a process but the technologies they thought would work aren't working at all. Management wants me to keep riding this horse even though I've hinted at it being a failure. I hope it doesn't reflect poorly on me if it fails for good.

DEAD HORSE RIDER

DEAR DEAD HORSE RIDER: Dead horse projects can certainly be quite frustrating to manage. Before you throw in the towel on it, be sure you've considered all possibilities from all possible angles. Since management keeps funding the project, it's very possible that they would also fund an outside expert to come in and give additional analysis of the situation. I recommend pursuing that option. If a consultant can't see any hope in the project, then you have a reinforcement opinion to back you up. This time don't hint at it being a failure, convincingly tell them it's a failure.

Your dilemma with a dead horse project is not uncommon. For humor's sake, take a look at "The Top Ten Strategies for Dealing with a Dead Horse" sent to John Maxwell:

1. Buy a stronger whip.

2. Change riders.

3. Appoint a committee to study the horse.

4. Appoint a team to revive the horse.

5. Send out a memo declaring the horse isn't really dead.

6. Hire an expensive consultant to find "the real problem."

7. Harness several dead horses together for increased speed and efficiency.

8. Rewrite the standard definition of *live horse*.

9. Declare the horse to be better, faster, and cheaper when dead.

10. Promote the dead horse to a supervisory position.

Over the years, I've seen every one of these "solutions" enacted in the work place. All of them avoiding the obvious: the horse is dead and can't be revived. As John Maxwell says, there's only one way to deal with a dead horse: dismount!

If you are directed by upper management to continue riding the dead horse despite your suggestion to bury it, it should not reflect poorly on you. Be sure to maintain an accurate record of all of your communication efforts about the status of the project in the event you need to reference them at a later date. If integrity and trust is lacking in your company or organization, then print out essential emails/memos and store them in a safe place to protect yourself from potential electronic sabotage.

Good luck with this challenge. Hopefully you can bury the dead horse and move on to a live horse.

For an opportunity to have your question, issue or concern addressed in the Dear Chief column, go to www.DearChiefAdvice.com and submit your comments or email them to Jeff@DearChiefAdvice.com.