The Philosophy of Project Management

A Mixture of Art, Science, Processes, and Common Sense.

Writers often get typecast, just like actors. This was brought home to me last month when I read the endorsement statements that had been contributed by several of my colleagues in support of my latest book on project management ("Practical Project Management", John Wiley & Sons). Several of these extremely kind statements noted my reputation as a project management tools expert, and almost seemed surprised that I had such extensive coverage of other project management topics.

Readers of this whitepapers section of the Scitor website should not be similarly surprised, as I have attempted to discuss a very wide range of practices and issues associated with project management. In the final section of the aforementioned book, I present several chapters under the heading of "Making Project Management Work". Here are the opening paragraphs:

> *Project Management is an ART. Project Management is a SCIENCE. Project Management is a PROCESS. Yes, it is all of these. But, most of all, Project Management is a lot of COMMON SENSE.*

> *Without organizing for project management and without establishing a set of project management practices, and developing a project management culture, project management is likely to fail. Yet, all of these are not enough to assure that any project management initiative will be successful. This is because project management cannot be solely an academic subject. Rather, it must be the practical application of the accumulated theory, knowledge and experience – about organizations, people, operations, and projects.*

In a nutshell, in order to successfully implement project management, there must be a sound, consistent, and reasonable **philosophy** of project management. Easy to say, of course, but much harder to accomplish. We are often slow to recognize the importance of project management as a way of life in the firm. There are still far too many executives who either fail to appreciate that business success is often dependent on project success, or that the management of projects and the management of operations are not two distinct and separate disciplines.

The single most prevalent obstacle to this goal (successful project management) is **cultural.** Culture is not an easy thing to change. But one thing is for certain. The change in culture must be directed and fully supported from the top. And this change must be implanted into the philosophy of all levels of management, if it is to eventually permeate the complete enterprise. For some practical guidance on this, read "Jack- Straight from the Gut" (Warner Business Books). Here, Jack Welsh tells (painfully) of how he learned to implant cultural change deep into the General Electric management hierarchy.

What are the changes that we want to bring about, to implant a project management culture? They include the following:

Tear Down the Walls

It would be appropriate at this point to note the comments made by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her book: The Change Masters (Simon & Schuster, 1983). Here, she identifies **segmentalism** as a key obstacle to change and innovation. My experiences support this premise. The culture of project management calls for a significant reduction in the artificial barriers that often develop within the enterprise. Managers take ownership of their disciplines, rather than the results. More often than not, this leads to a blockage of support rather than contributing to success. This cannot be allowed to exist in a successful project management culture.

In this day and age, we have come to recognize knowledge power as being more important than position power. This has led to the development of temporary teams to meet the needs of temporary projects. The personnel forming these teams are chosen for their ability to contribute to the project results, rather than their position in the hierarchy.

Flexibility, adaptability, and openness are the hallmarks of this new project culture.

Bridge the Gaps

Segmentalism is the cause of another obstacle to project success. As each discipline in the organization minds its own store, too many things fall through the cracks. One of the most egregious gaps is that which traditionally exists between the venerable *Operations* function and the newer *Projects* function. Each function views its role differently. The Operations people focus on Objectives, Goals, Strategies, Project Selection & Mix, and Cash Flow. The Projects people concentrate more on Schedules and Time, Project Cost, Performance, Stakeholder Satisfaction, and Scope/Change Control.

True project success requires that the gap between these two essential groups be bridged. Tools exist to facilitate this connection. But first, the culture must change to promote a partnership between these functions. The projects people have to realize that projects may not be an end, but rather a means to achieve the firm's larger objectives. Thus, the management of such projects cannot be performed in isolation, but rather as part of the overall strategic operation. Likewise, the operations people need the success of projects to achieve the firm's strategic goals. They need to be active in communicating these goals, and the operating conditions, to the people responsible for the projects. And they need to be active in monitoring the project activity and in contributing to strategic decisions and solutions.

Take Risks and Manage Them

It's difficult to find the middle ground on risk. Some people are fundamentally risk averse. This is not good for a projects environment. Most projects involve risk. The nature of projects is that they tend to be one-time executions, requiring excursions into new areas of technology or development. Or they may be subject to the elements of nature, strife, economics, politics, etc. To avoid risk would mean to avoid opportunity.

On the other hand, many people ignore risk, or are in risk denial. This is even worse. Given the choice of the two philosophies, I would rather give up the opportunity than to forge blindly ahead and lose cash, reputation, or market position.

But we are not limited to these two choices. The successful project management operation will foster a culture where risk is encouraged, but managed. Risks must be evaluated and, where significant, must include a risk mitigation plan. Then, the projects must be monitored for risk-sensitive events and the team should be ready to invoke previously identified alternatives when indicated.

My philosophy calls for a Chief Risk Officer (or the like) who is responsible to establish risk management practices (and culture), to sign-off on projects only when an acceptable risk evaluation and mitigation plan is executed, and to monitor risk areas that would expose to firm to damaging consequences.

Provide Leadership

None of the above will come about by itself, or from grass-roots initiatives. A philosophy that breaks down decades-old barriers, that brings together two diverse functions, that changes attitudes and methods in dealing with risk, can only be promoted from the top. If senior management does not buy into this philosophy and implement staffing and procedural change, all is lost. If senior management does not find a way to implant this philosophy deeply into the middle and lower ranks of management, the initiative will fail. It must be clear to all that this project management philosophy is a *way of life* in the firm and that support for project management is a *condition of employment*.

Shared responsibilities and contribution should lead to shared measurements and shared rewards. Senior management will motivate the desired behavior if they implement changes in the measurement and reward systems by providing shared rewards for contributions to project success.

The projects function must be led by a Chief Project Officer (or the like). The CPO will head up the Project Management Office (PMO). It is here that project management standards and practices will be developed, communicated and monitored. The PMO will develop or acquire competent project management expertise and will act as a mentor to those who are supporting the projects activities. The CPO will have the full support and

ear of the senior executive, and will coordinate closely with the Chief Operating Officer (COO) to implement the enterprise's strategy and monitor results toward its goals.

The firm will encourage individuals to seek education and certification in project management practices and shall reward such individuals for increasing their competence and, hence, their potential value to the enterprise.

Senior management will encourage respect for all disciplines (operations, functional, projects) as they contribute to the success of the enterprise. This project management culture will invite all parties to contribute, regardless of rank or position.

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