

The Modern Techniques of Commerce with Matters Connected to Projects

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I. INTRODUCTION

A project involves a large number of interrelated activities (or task) that must be completed on or before a specified time limit, in a specified sequence (or order) with specified quality and minimum cost of using resources such as personnel, money, materials, facilities and/or space. Example of projects include, construction of bridge, highway, power plant, repair and maintenance of an oil refinery or an air plane; design, development and marketing of a new product, research and development work, etc (Asare, 2017). A project can be defined as an activity with a specific goal occupying a specific period of time (Wild, 2002). Project management has been around a long time. Methods and tools have come and gone. However, the issues presented here go back many years. They remain as a constant reminder that project management issues involve management and people — often more than they involve the technology and systems. More specifically, the issues presented here are some of the vital issues related to projects and that if not handled well will prevent the progress of the project.

II. DISCUSSION

A. *Dealing with projects that do not seem to start out right*

Project management is more than merely parceling out work assignments to individuals and hoping that they will somehow accomplish a desired result. In fact, projects that could have been successful often fail because of such take-it-for-granted approaches. Individuals need hard information and real skills to work successfully in a project environment and to accomplish project objectives.

i. *Discussion*

A project seems to get going in the right direction. Then many issues appear. People have different ideas of what to do. The project may get sidetracked into other, unplanned areas. A reason for this is lack of planning. The problem often lies in lack of structure at the start. Someone comes up with a project idea. It is approved without a great deal of discussion and analysis. People figure that the details can be sorted out later when the project plan is reviewed. A project leader is appointed and creates a project plan. If the project leader is typical, this will be a plan that has quite a bit of detail. The problems have begun. The project leader had to make assumptions in order to create the plan. Things are starting to unravel. When the plan is reviewed, managers raise questions, but they may be intimidated by the detail. They do not want to see the plan again. They figure they can correct problems later. Things are really going downhill and no one seems aware of it. On the surface everything is fine.

ii. *Impact*

The impact of the problem is that additional work has to be expended to get the project back on course. This can take as much effort as turning a steamship or cruise ship. Turning a project is not like paddling a canoe. The morale of the team is impacted. People on the team now feel that what they did was worthless. They have to do more work, but the schedule allowed for the work did not change. What is worse politically is that team members now begin to feel that management does not know what they want. They begin to mistrust both the project leader and management. All of these are clear signs of future failure.

iii. *Detection*

You can detect the issue by asking the team members individually what they feel the purpose and scope of the project is. Do this with management and the project leader. You may find as many different views as there are people. Next, look at the project plan. If the task wording appears vague and could fit any number of other projects, then you have ambiguity. Ambiguity and fuzziness in a project plan are normally not desirable. Some vagueness is useful for political reasons, but a great deal of it presents a problem.

iv. Actions and Prevention

How can you prevent this problem? At the start of any project, insist that a project concept be developed. The project concept should contain the following elements:

- Purposes of the work — technical, business, political, cultural
- Scope of the work
- Likely issues to be encountered
- Roles and responsibilities in the project
General schedule for the work
- Impact on the business if the project fails or is stopped

Why is this a good idea? Because it helps people to develop a common vision of the project and work. It has been shown to prevent later scope creep and requirement changes as well. Moreover, it is politically useful. Why? Because the work has not started yet. There is no plan. Managers can argue over purpose, scope, and roles at little or no cost or effort. Talk is cheap here. It gets expensive later. You can also use the project concept if you detect the problem in a project that has already begun. Do not stop the work. Go back and gather people to develop the concept. To speed this up, you can define a strawman or candidate project concept and get them to review it (Lientz and Larssen, 2006).

B. Dealing with unexpected Surprises in the project

Why do so many projects fail to meet their goals for time, cost and performance? Regardless of the answer, many project managers and their executive sponsors seem to be surprised when a new project gets off track: “Why didn’t we see that coming?” Even projects that employ sophisticated techniques for risk management can encounter surprising derailments.

i. Discussion

What is a surprise? Some unexpected or unanticipated event. A surprise, whether unpleasant or pleasant, catches you off guard. You are not prepared for it. Now, your personal life may bring many nice surprises of which you have fond memories: Someone asks you out for a date; you get a present you did not expect; a surprise party is thrown in your honor. This is not so in projects. Project management can also harbor surprises. Sadly, experience tells us that many of these are not pleasant. Why does this happen? Some surprises occur because of the nature of the project. Many people think that surprises cannot be controlled, that they just happen. This used to be the case for fire departments (Lientz and Larssen, 2006). Then fire departments started implementing a policy of inspecting buildings to help prevent fires. The number of surprises for them dropped. There are steps that can be taken to prevent and mitigate surprises in projects.

ii. Impact

What is the impact of a surprise? What you are working on is disturbed. The surprise takes time to deal with. There is additional stress. After you deal with the surprise, it will take more time to get the work back on track. Politically, there are more impacts. When caught off guard, some people act defensively. Their attitudes and demeanor do not come off well. This often can make a negative impression. It will take time to reverse this politically. And you probably know that the person who surprised you will always remember your initial reaction, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. If others are aware that you were surprised, there could be more problems. Managers may think that you should have been more on top of the work. They may question your management abilities.

iii. Detection

You can detect if you are having problems with surprises if you record and track the frequency, subject, and nature of each surprise. This is one action item you can take now.

If you find that surprises are more frequent, it can mean several things.

- You are over focused on the work and not getting out and communicating.
- You are not as aware of what is going on around you as you once were.
- The problems are building up and you have been unable to deal with them successfully.

iv. Actions and Prevention

In addition to the action on tracking, you can prevent surprises by staying in touch with people. Here are some specific steps.

- See managers on a regular basis. Do this informally. Politically, this is good for you. It shows that you care for the services you provide to them. Also, you will get an early warning of an issue. Third, you do not show up with a problem yourself, so the managers are generally happy to see you.
- Go around and talk to the staff about what is going on. See what they are working on. Volunteer to assist. This helps politically and provides you with more information.
- Keep a record of contacts you have made each week. Plan ahead for the next week. Try to see key managers at least once every two weeks. These suggestions make sense. They are simple to do. Why don't people follow them? They take time, and time is a precious asset in projects. Also, this takes initiative and requires a person to be outgoing. Some project managers are not outgoing. You should also expect surprises. Be ready at any time to give status to and address active, open issues.

After you have experienced a surprise, look for a pattern and analyze the surprise. Here are some questions to answer.

- Was there a political motive in the mind of the person who came to you?
- Could the person have waited?
- Was the situation that urgent?
- When was the last time you were in contact with this person?
- Could you have anticipated the surprise?

C. Dealing with unplanned work in the project

One thing which hit me hard is 'Unplanned work' – how much we undermine this in our projects and the impact of it. Always when an unplanned work pops up, like production issues then the committed work in the current sprint takes a hit. There could be so many different types of unplanned work, like some executive trying to sneak in some favours, Marketing committing something and telling the development team to do this as a high priority or production issues.

i. Discussion

Every project has unplanned work, things come up and you have to address them. This becomes a problem only when the amount of unplanned work and effort is great. This can be a symptom of a number of different problems, including the following.

- The scope of the project is expanding.
- The original estimate and planning for the work are faulty.
- There are new requirements within the existing scope.
- Users or managers are trying to use the project to get other things done.
- The team members are using the project to get other things done.

ii. Impact

Unplanned work was not in the schedule or plan. That is obvious. So that means that unless the team works with abnormal energy and effort, the schedule will slip. Another impact is that you now do not know how much of this is going on. In the worst case, you might have an "iceberg project," in which a high percentage of the work is unplanned. This is not a good sign. In fact, it's an omen for failure.

iii. Detection

It is best to assume that unplanned work is going on. That way, you will not experience a surprise (addressed earlier). What should you do? Visit the team members twice a week and find out what they are working on. Ask them if there is anything new. Is any work taking longer than estimated? Then you can get at the source of the extra work and slippage.

iv. Actions and Prevention

You can begin to prevent it at the start of the project when you establish the scope. Validate the scope of the work in the business process or situation. Next, when you have requirements, validate them with the process. During the work, assume the worst. New requirements and changes are occurring. Visit user departments on a regular basis to both detect and deal with these things. Another action is to impose a rule on the project team: Team members have to come to you if they find any unplanned work of more than two hours. This may seem stringent and tight. Don't worry. Start with this, and later you can relax it to a day. The political point here is that you want the team members to know that you are taking unplanned work seriously. Now turn to the actual work. Insist that users go through the

project leader with any changes or requests. They are not to go to team members. Each change will be viewed in light of the questions we raised earlier about new requests and requirement changes.

D. Dealing with Difficulty in Managing and Tracking Multiple Projects

Multi-project Management is always challenging for organizations, but when you are handling different type of projects for multiple organizations the complexity increases many fold. Managing and tracking different project plans, keeping track of your budgets and costs, handling different types of resources and materials, communications with your clients and colleagues, sharing your project related information in a secure way and generating reports that are accurate and meaningful will be formidable without the right solutions to assist you in your project management and can really be challenging at times.

i. Discussion

Different projects involve different users, project leaders, and schedules. If you leave the setup and management to the project leaders, then each project leader will develop a schedule based on his or her style and experience. Thus, you could have the same work with five different project leaders and end up with widely varying project plans in terms of detail, milestones, and identification of risk. Now look at what is common to the projects. In general they share the same pool of resources. They share the same issues. The underlying project management methods and tools are the same. The problem often arises because management sees neither the need for more structure across the projects nor the urgency. This happened in an outsourcing software development firm in Asia. Each project manager did his or her own thing. Some used spreadsheets for project tracking. One used Microsoft Outlook. Others employed Microsoft Project. You could not put the schedules together (Lientz and Larssen, 2006).

ii. Impact

If there is no organized approach and structure for the projects, then you cannot roll up the schedules to get an overall view of the work. What are you missing out on? Here are some answers.

- Most project managers and general managers like to see a GANTT chart that summarizes all projects. They can compare the progress of one to another. This can also generate a sense of calm.
- It is difficult to get a picture of what resources are required across the projects.
- Issues cross projects. If the projects were organized and relied on the same master list of issues, then you could easily see those issues and their impacts across the projects.

There is another political impact: If management does not impose structure and more uniformity, then the staff and project leaders are more likely to believe in the uniqueness of each project. It is more complex and harder to gather lessons learned across the work.

iii. Detection

It is easy to detect when there is a lack of structure. Just ask the project leaders for their plans. If you get different approaches from each project leader, then you know this problem exists. Another sign of the problem appears if management deals with one project at a time. Each meeting focuses on a single project. The issues are always project specific.

iv. Actions and Prevention

The beginning of the effort to impose structure starts by showing the project leaders that they are doing extra work because of a lack of structure. We have carried work to implement structure in managing projects many times. A basic lesson learned is that until the project leaders and staff realize the benefits from organization and the problems with “going it alone,” there is little hope of lasting change. The next steps are to identify a common list of issues and to define project templates for the work. A template is a high-level plan with dependencies but no durations or real resources. You can use a template to generate a plan. This saves time, improves consistency, and supports multiple-project analysis. The templates are stable and can improve in detail over time with experience. The templates are modular. You can have templates for data conversion, testing, development, software acquisition, etc. The overall plan is composed of separate but interrelated templates and plans. This is a component-based approach. After this you can carry it further. You could impose even more standardization. You could deploy Prince 2, PMBOK (the project management book of knowledge), or some other method.

E. Dealing with Time Consuming Project Administration

Every project manager will concurrently lead multiple projects at many points in their career. Some jobs are so large they absorb the full attention of a project manager, but even these big projects typically generate multiple design change orders. Handling this workload effectively is a challenge for even very experienced individuals.

i. Discussion

In traditional project management, such as construction, a project leader spends a great deal of time and effort in project administration. This includes working with the project management software, entering and updating task information, tracking project status, and doing project reporting. Individuals in the project management office spend most of their time doing these tasks.

ii. Impact

You need a more collaborative effort. If the project leader spends all or most of his or her time in project administration, the leader becomes detached from the work. He or she may be obsessed with either accuracy or detail or both. This means that the leader has less time to deal with issues and no time to perform actual work on the project. The team feels effects as well. Because the team members did not define their tasks and do not update them, they have no sense of ownership of the plan. It is the project leader's plan. Certainly, it is not their plan. This creates problems and misunderstandings later on. It gives the team members an excuse when problems arise. The underlying problem is that the people doing the work are best suited to defining their own detailed tasks.

iii. Detection

Observe how several project leaders spend their time. Are they out with staff, vendors, management, and users? Or are they working at their desks using their PCs all day long? If so, you definitely have a problem here. Next, see how issues are addressed. Are the project leaders aware of the details of issues? Or are they familiar with issues at a more general level? If the project leader appears detached from the issues, this could spell doom or at least future major problems.

iv. Actions and Prevention

Project managers sometimes have no expectations or goals with respect to the time management for project leaders. Here is a mix that we have found desirable, even if it cannot easily be achieved.

- *Addressing issues — 40–50% of time*
 - *Communications — 30–40% of time*
 - *Project administration — 10–20% of time*
 - *Doing work in the project — 10% of time*
- (Lientz and Larssen, 2006)*

You may never get there, but in pursuing the goal you will reduce the percentage in project administration. How do you proceed to reduce project administration time? Here are some specific guidelines.

- Adjust the frequency of project meetings to match the number of issues. When there are few burning project issues, you can hold fewer meetings. Fewer meetings equals higher productivity.
- Have the team members define and update their own tasks. The project leader can then review these and the updates. This gets the team members involved in the project management of the work.
- Standardize project reporting so as to make this easier.
- Have all formal presentations structured into the same outlines. This saves time.
- Reduce the number of formal presentations and focus instead on informal communications. This saves preparation time.

III. CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted some of the issues related to projects and how to deal with it. So often projects start and its completion becomes a challenge due to some the related issues discussed above. The project manager must monitor and control the human side of his project. This involves utilizing appropriate forms of power in managing the project team to obtain desired results. Project teams also need to manage stakeholder expectations through understanding their expectations, delivering on those expectations, and communicating effectively (Kloppenborg, 2012). This will give the project manager the upper hand to deal with issues that may cause the failure of the project.

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