

REFORMING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Using leadership skills to manage IT projects

The role of IT project management in today's organizations is undeniably crucial. After all, projects – and the positive results they aim to achieve – are what drives business. Failure to deliver the desired results within budget and on time poses an additional cost factor, ultimately eroding profit margins and tarnishing corporate image.

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Modern project management began to take shape in the early years of the 20th century with the introduction of the Gantt Chart in 1917 advancing the science of project management dramatically. The theory has evolved since then as businesses began to see the benefit of organizing work around planned activities and the critical need to communicate and integrate work across multiple corporate entities and functions. Nowadays, project management is regarded as a discipline in its own right. Abundant literature is available on the subject and many renowned training centres around the world specialize in this field.

Nonetheless, despite the heavy corporate investment in project methodologies and certification, the failure rate for IT projects remains high. For instance, the Standish Group CHAOS Report – a revealing survey of IT project failure, still regarded as seminal and pertinent – found that a staggering 31.1% of projects are cancelled before they ever get completed and that 52.7% of projects cost over 189% of their original estimates. Only 16.2% of software projects were found to be completed on-time and within budget.

The reasons for failure are often recurrent, e.g.:

- poor cost/schedule estimate
- weak communication
- lack of executive sponsorship

Meanwhile, as IT departments and providers face ever-increasing demands, the expectations being placed on individual projects are growing all the time.

Leading thinkers in project management have come up with numerous approaches to addressing these issues. The most direct response has been to reinforce existing methodologies by beefing up the number of people, processes and technologies. Traditionally, project management – based on planning and controlling – focuses on the essential elements of a series of activities, such as ROI, timetables, resource management, risk, etc. However, whilst these elements are undoubtedly important in today's projects, they are based on the strong assumption that the activities and the context are known variables.

Yet, this is where such approaches often fall down: in our rapidly changing world, we increasingly find ourselves having to venture into unknown territory. In the future, more and more projects will be characterized by high levels of speed, change and stress. As globalization expands, projects will tend to be increasingly dispersed and, indeed, politically charged. There will be greater uncertainty with respect to both the “means” (technology and human resources) and the “end” (customer objectives and requirements). And the growing trends towards outsourcing and offshoring will continue to raise additional challenges. Clearly, therefore, managing IT projects is no longer solely about systems and methodologies. In times of uncertainty, traditional project management no longer makes the cut. Better planning and stronger control will only increase costs and not necessarily

bring order to chaos. What is needed is a new set of skills, an approach that will take project management beyond the hard facts of known and studied principles and into the realm of managing the uncertain. What is needed are leaders who are capable of adapting their projects to the prevailing conditions and who, above all, expect the unexpected. Only then can project management evolve sufficiently to become “project leadership”.

Project leadership applies leadership skills to traditional project management, taking it beyond the hard-and-fast rules of systems and methodologies. It means adding greater perception and insight to the traditional approach, ultimately improving the likelihood of project success.

Borrowing from some of the foremost thinkers in leadership studies, the following five principles form the fundamentals of future project leadership:

Adding the WOW! factor

Management guru Tom Peters coined (and trademarked) the term “WOW! Project” as an innovative approach to the human side of project management that helps inspire teams and individuals. Basically, this entails blending the tangible – measurable outcomes, action plans, budgets, timelines – with the intangible – creativity, innovation, passion, personality and design. Creating the WOW! factor in a project means adding value through innovative thinking and collaboration with team members, thereby increasing employee productivity and job satisfaction. It means producing a higher level of motivation, by giving employees an opportunity to create high-impact projects

that motivate team members and other members of the organization, and greater productivity, by providing employees with the tools they need to do exciting and memorable work. A project that has successfully captured the WOW! factor is one that will have its people firmly on its side.

Building relationships and communication

Giving a project some extra oomph is only the first step. Once kindled, this enthusiasm has to be continually communicated and rekindled throughout the entire project life-time. In a volatile business climate like today's, the ability to communicate authentically and powerfully is a crucial leadership competence. However, it is important that communication should go beyond the mere facts. Communication experts Clarke and Crossland reveal that effective leaders communicate in three channels: facts, emotions and symbols. Project managers who tend to speak to their team on just the factual channel may not understand why their messages don't resonate with the team; what they have to realize is that team members will always put the message through their own emotional and symbolic filters. Communicating on all three channels is necessary to help build better relationships and strengthen teamwork.

Embracing corporate culture

Embracing the culture is about understanding the context in which the project will be executed. It means understanding the value system of the organization in question and acting accordingly. This issue becomes even more challenging when the project is outsourced to an external partner; here, the key question is how to convey one's value system to outside partners.

Drawing on 25 years of consulting experience, David Rooke and William Torbert have devised a typology of leadership based on the way managers personally make sense of the world. Leaders – and therefore project managers – who try to understand their own typology, their “action logic”, can transform not only their own capabilities but also those of their companies. The way project managers view and make sense of the world around them will make a huge difference to the project outcome. It is therefore important that their own value systems are in line with those of the organization.

Profiling team members

We each have our own personal style of working and our preferred way of working when we are part of a team. We have all come across different types of people in our various projects, as for instance the person who has new ideas, the person who will organize. The key is to recognize and understand how these people will make a difference in a project.

A leading thinker on teambuilding, R. Meredith Belbin devised a set of eight different team roles with different profiles and backgrounds: the implementer, the coordinator, the driver, the creator, the investigator, the evaluator, the communicator and the finisher. The true project leader knows how to make it happen with such a variety of skills and styles. Whether leaders are proactive at selecting the right profiles beforehand or being reactive at managing the existing team, project leaders need to make sure they don't just lead a group as a single entity but understand the differences between team members.

Greater flexibility, less bureaucracy

Experience has shown that attempting to resolve uncertainty by adding more planning and control will only serve to increase complexity. Project management in an increasingly uncertain environment has to be flexible, with incremental and experimental approaches as opposed to large-scale projects with fixed objectives.

Extreme project management (XPM) refers to the method of managing very complex and very uncertain projects. This differs from traditional project management mainly in its open, elastic and undeterministic approach. The main focus of XPM is on the human side of project management (e.g. managing project stakeholders), rather than on intricate scheduling techniques and heavy formalism. This people-centric approach to high performance makes quality-of-life a fundamental part of the project venture.

Conclusion

The traditional skills of organization and administration will always have a key role to play in IT project management. But given the ever-increasing complexity of projects and the environment in which they are run, such skills can only go so far before regres-

sing into excessive bureaucracy. Successful project management of the future will rely increasingly on leadership skills. As project management evolves into project leadership, it will be based more on people and what motivates them, instead of forcing people to adapt to a sterile methodology. Ultimately, leading a project is about getting things done in a given environment, where success is more a matter of passion and persistence than of power or rank.

References

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