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Sharpen Your Tools

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The New Face of Project Management

Moving Ahead

The new face of project management in a rapidly changing industry

With the creation of easy-to-use project management software and the ability to research the basic principles of project management practice, is a formal structure of project management outdated? Are we ready for the next phase in project management?

Many traditional project managers may snub their noses at such a preposterous question. But in its rapid development, the infantile discipline of project management has grown leaps and bounds, being simplified and over-simplified to allow everyone in a company to achieve the status of project manager.

But in reality, the discipline was created to eradicate those who call themselves project managers but are merely task leaders or a part of the overall project manager's roll. The goal was to move those people toward a more disciplined approach to project management in the hopes of achieving a standard system.

A Whole New World

For the longest time, project management organizations and tools have governed the method by which projects should be executed, creating and controlling the standards of the project management world. But a new breed of project management is emerging as current business needs change, and the need to take products to market more rapidly prevails over the risk of not having a full project management plan.

Enter the world of internet software and the basic fundamentals of task, schedule and communications management.

Many software tools exist today that strip project management down to its core. For example, Basecamp allows users to manage tasks and focus solely on communications and task management. Other developers have decided that a Flash version of a Gantt chart is just as good as the real thing, and who is to say it isn't? Traditionalists will look at this and point to the process groups of project management, challenging them to identify the project framework, scope management, risk management, procurement management and quality assurance plan. And like most traditionalists, I asked the same questions, pleading with my company that pushing projects through on such basic principles will only fail.

Making it Work

I continued my quest for project perfection, but to no avail. The risk matrix became a four-line document highlighting the key issues that may arise. Where was the estimated contingency plan and corrective action log? Project schedules were often created without work breakdown structures, earned value, cost performance index or schedule performance index columns. And base lining the schedule was a foreign word.

How could I, a traditional project manager, possibly deliver a quality project without the use of the correct project management tools?

I was sitting in a meeting with a few project managers, discussing the intricacies of the project management discipline and the organization's lack of understanding. That's when it dawned on me that I was the one who

didn't understand. All this time, I was trying to push a structured project management standard onto a company that didn't operate within the confines of the regular business model and prided itself on "left-of-center" thinking.

I had it all wrong. Project management standards didn't exist, because I had never taken the time to reconcile the two—project management standards and Taco Bell's culture—to provide a left-of-center project management tool.

The basic software project management tools were starting to look more appealing. With simple customization we could create easy-to-use software that not only achieved the basic principles of project management, but also sent the message that the organization was creating its own breed of project managers to shake up the status quo.

The Modern Status Quo

It wasn't until I had a meeting with a senior member of the organization that I realized we were taking on the status quo. We were not operating within the guidelines of what a project should be. Instead, we were responding to the business needs of our industry and achieving project results that were far from perfect—but good enough to give us the edge and satisfy our customers.

It's with this realization that I look to the traditionalists and ask the following questions: What is project management? How can we put standards on an organization when it is the organization that drives the reality of what standards are achievable? Our projects were 80- percent planned, but they achieved what was needed. We didn't have to be chauffeured to work in a limo. Driving the Honda Civic got us there all the same.

Millennial Project Management

Millennial Project Management is an emerging approach that requires our attention. Let's embrace the fact that the organizational needs dictate the standard of project management. Is 80 percent good enough? And if it is, why do we write long guidelines and manuals on achieving 100 percent?

Anybody and everybody who has completed a substantial project will realize that "project management" and "ambiguous" are not synonymous terms. For years, traditionalists have pushed the belief that 100-percent planning will net a 100-percent result. But keep in mind that a 100-percent result delivered three months late only leaves us with less profit and a constant need to catch up to the competition.

We could argue that ambiguity and flexibility are two very different elements in a project, but with the ambiguous nature of a national, multi-unit chain, it is imperative that the project is flexible enough to embrace the unknown. Traditionalists may argue that the creation of a risk matrix and a risk response plan should quell the ambiguity and mitigate any issues that arise, and I agree. On any given project, we as a company identify an initiative, test the initiative and get it into the stores as quickly as possible. Because every day we don't put the initiative into market is a day without profit or savings.

Putting initiatives into multi-units, located geographically across the United States, has its limitations when mitigating risk. As much as a risk response plan would be beneficial, it not only slows the process, it doesn't allow for each unit to have its own risks identified, which results in a larger contingency for the unknown.

The C-suite does not like large contingencies. As we all know, those funds are perceived as "free money" to hide or fix issues. So we are left with very little in the risk plan and little to no contingency. Many traditionalists might gasp for air trying to understand how such a project is even allowed in a large corporation, and I thought the very same thing when considering my position as a national project manager.

Millennial Project Management looks at ambiguity and flexibility through rose-colored lenses, where thrill-seeking project managers continually battle the unknown, with minimal planning while working at lightning speed to get the project to market. With the advent of basic project management software allowing the project manager to manage the necessities of the project, a higher-risk project is rewarded with higher returns and a greater sense of achievement. This is the new way of project management, walking a tight rope of greater achievement with little to balance on and a thin safety net of standard processes and procedures on which to rely.

The difference? Eighty percent is good enough for Millennial Project Management, which always touts higher risk for higher returns versus the lower risk, slower returns of traditionalists at 100-percent project planning.

Finding Your Own Way

Project managers today can ask their organization a few key questions to recalibrate their direction in the modern market:

1. What is our risk tolerance?
2. What are we doing to stay ahead in an ever-changing market, and are we getting our products/services out fast enough?
3. Are we following yesterday's procedures and policies?

4. How do we reinvent the industry and sit in the driver's seat through our initiatives?

By answering these questions, a project manager can determine their role in the organization and react to project initiatives in a traditionalist or millennial approach.

With the on-demand world that technology has created, it is hard to believe that traditional project management will survive with its detailed planning and intricate design. But one thing is certain: It has created a solid foundation for the next step, which needs to be taken to achieve industry leadership.

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