

Overcoming Resistance to Project Management Within the Organization

DLB Associates, LLC - Dennis Bolles, PMP

Asking people to change the way work is done typically meets with some form of resistance. Establishing project management practices is a good example of that type of change. Establishing the value of project management is the necessary first step in overcoming such resistance.

I recently read an article published by Tom Mochal, entitled "The Value of Project Management" (webmaster of www.tenstep.com, website Copyright © 2000-2001 Tom Mochal), that provides some excellent rebuttals to those individuals who question the value of project management.

"Good project management discipline is the way to overcome these shortcomings. Having good project management skills does not mean you have no problems. It does not mean that risks go away. It does not mean that there are no surprises. The value of good project management is that you have standard processes in place to deal with all contingencies.

Project management processes and techniques are used to coordinate resources to achieve predictable results. However, it should be understood up front that project management is not totally a science, and there is never a guarantee of success. Because projects involve people, there is always complexity and uncertainty that cannot be absolutely controlled. So, project management is also partly an art that requires flexibility and creativity to being successful as well. It is a science because it relies on proven and repeatable processes and techniques to achieve project success. It is an art because it has a lot to do with managing and relating to people. Therefore the project manager also must rely on people management, good judgment, interpersonal skills and personal intuition. A good project management methodology provides a framework, process, guidelines and techniques to greatly increase the odds of being successful, and therefore provides value to the project and the Project Manager.

The value proposition for project management goes something like this. It takes time and effort to proactively manage a project. This cost is more than made up for over the life of the project by:

- ❑ Resolving problems more quickly
- ❑ Not working in areas that are outside of the scope of the project
- ❑ Resolving future risk before the problems occur
- ❑ Communicating and managing expectations with customers, team members and stakeholders more effectively
- ❑ Building a higher quality product the first time.

People who complain that project management is a lot of 'overhead' forget the point. Your project is going to face issues. Do you want to proactively resolve them or figure them out as you go? Your project will face potential risks. Do you want to try to resolve them before they happen, or wait until the problems arise? Are you going to communicate proactively or deal with conflict caused by lack of project information? Are you going to manage scope or let scope manage you? Are you

going to build quality into your process, or fix problems later when they will be more costly to resolve? The characteristics of the project are not going to change whether you use a formal project management process or not. What changes is how the events are dealt with when the project is in progress. Are they dealt with haphazardly and reactively? Or proactively with a smoothly running process?

After reading this, you might wonder why everyone does not utilize good project management techniques. Or you might think about yourself. Why aren't you using them? There are probably a couple reasons.

Good project management requires an upfront investment of time and effort. Many people consider themselves to be 'doers'. They might not be as comfortable with their planning skills. Many times there is a tendency to discuss a problem, and then go out and fix it. This works when you have a five-hour change request. It doesn't work on a 5,000-hour project. Resist the urge to jump right in. The project will complete sooner if you properly plan it first, and then have the discipline to manage the project effectively.

Your organization is not committed. It's hard to be a good project manager in an organization that doesn't value project management skills. For instance, if you take the time to create a Project Definition document, and your client asks why you were wasting your time doing it, then probably you are not going to be very excited about the planning process on your next project. To be effective, the entire organization must be behind it.

You don't know how to. Sometimes it's not a matter of will, but a matter of skill. Sometimes people are asked to manage projects without the training or the experience necessary. In those cases, you struggle without the right tools or training to manage effectively.

You may have been burned (or buried) in the past. A common criticism of methodology is that it is cumbersome, paper intensive and takes too much focus away from the work at hand. Sometimes this criticism is a feature of the first bullet point above. Other times, it was a legitimate concern, caused by not scaling the methodology to the size of your project. For instance, if you were required to develop a fifteen page Project Definition even if your project is only 250 hours, you may have been turned off. This is not usually a methodology problem as much as it is a misapplication of the methodology.

There is a fear of control. Many people like to be able to solve problems and do their jobs creatively and with a minimum of supervision. They might fear that formal project management techniques will result in tight controls that will take the fun out of the work. Common processes and procedures do eliminate some of the creativity in areas where you probably don't want it in the first place.

Although these may be reasons to be hesitant about using project management, they must be overcome. If you are new to this subject, you need to first understand the value proposition. If the result of project management were that projects would complete slower, cost more and have poor quality, it would not make sense to use it. However, the opposite is true - using sound project management techniques and processes will give you a higher likelihood that your project will be completed on time, within budget and to an acceptable level of quality.

That being said, when you use a project management process, be smart. Don't build the project management processes for a ten million dollar project if your project

is only ten thousand dollars. Consider all aspects of how to manage a project, and build the right processes for your size project. “

There are four elements of project management knowledge areas out of the nine total that I consider to be fundamental and critical to managing projects successfully. That is not to say the others are less important, they just don't have the same degree of impact as these four do. They are development and maintenance of a:

- ❑ Scope Statement
- ❑ Baseline Schedule
- ❑ Communication Plan
- ❑ Risk Assessment

If an organization is taught to properly use these tools consistently and effectively the result will be more projects being completed successfully. Success is an enabler that reduces resistance from those who doubt the value that project management practices can provide to the organization, and it helps speed up the adoption of the other methodology processes.

Dennis Bolles, president of DLB Associates, LLC, is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) with nearly 25 years experience in increasing professional performance levels within many organizations. He excels in developing multi-functional teams to improve business workflow processes utilizing Six Sigma and other methods to achieve “world-class” capabilities in meeting the needs of internal and external customers. He is a published author of many project management articles, and a book entitled Building Project Management Centers of Excellence, (ISBN 0-8144-0717-X), released by Amacom in June 2002. For additional information visit the DLB Associates, LLC web site at www.dlballc.com or contact the author by email at dbolles@dlballc.com.