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Implementing Project Management: *Commitment and Training Ensure Success*

TWO SCENARIOS

The contrast was startling. It was like Mutt and Jeff. Like Reagan and Carter. Like Saddam Hussein and Mother Theresa. Here were two clients, both from the same industry, both in the process of implementing a computer-based project management process. Yet, there was a clear difference in how they were going about this implementation. One had undertaken a cohesive plan of action that would help to maximize the potential benefits from this investment. The other had difficulty in putting all the pieces together, and in making the commitment to fully support the new process.

One of these firms was taking a series of well-coordinated actions that would provide them with an excellent chance of success. The other would certainly gain some benefits from their move toward structured, computer-based planning, but would find that these benefits would be scattered and intermittent, negating the potential for enterprise-wide schedule and resource management.

My files are packed with examples of failed project management software implementations, and it is not difficult to point to the reasons for these failures.

THE ROLE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

In my articles, I have frequently addressed the issue of project management software selection. In these, I urge the readers to take a deliberate and structured approach toward software selection, considering their project management methods, their corporate culture, and their specific planning and control requirements. Yet, regardless of the diligence that is needed in this area, the selection of a project management software product is *not* the most significant element in the successful implementation of a computer-based project management capability. The project management software is *part* of a process. It is only a tool to aid in this process. It is more important to ensure that everyone understands the process, understands their role in the process, and is fully committed to its success.

Reducing all of this commentary to just two words; they are:

"Commitment" and "Training"

Commitment

A firm that is fully committed to the successful implementation of a computer based project management capability, like our first example above, will embark upon a proactive program consisting of the following elements:

- ❑ **Establish a project management implementation team**, with a project manager, responsible to a senior officer of the organization.
- ❑ **Examine the way the firm is organized to manage projects**, and the methods employed to do so.
- ❑ **Recommend changes**, as required, to bring the organization and methodology in line with the project management objectives.
- ❑ **Obtain support** for these recommendations from **key stakeholders**, especially from top management.
- ❑ The employment of project management software in the project management process is often just a part of the system of computer based functions. The benefits from using such project management software, therefore, can be considerably enhanced **by integrating the functions of the project management software with the other automated functions**. Common data should be shared between these functions. Redundancy is not only wasteful, but leads to inconsistencies and, eventually, confusion.
- ❑ **Provide a common data structure** for integrating of computer-based functions. Look for common labels and “pigeon holes” to link the data between subsystems.
- ❑ **Manifest management support** by seeking a sponsor, a clear advocate and champion of the new process, supported by some type of corporate directive announcing that project management, as set up by the new methods and responsibilities, is to be a “way of life” in the company.
- ❑ **Support this “way of life”** through job descriptions and rewards. Make certain that all project management responsibilities are outlined in the applicable position descriptions. Eliminate old responsibilities which conflict with the new way of life. Integrate PM software with all other relevant management systems.

An otherwise good process can be crippled by muddled roles and responsibilities. There is a tendency today to incorporate project functions into traditional functional-type organizations, without delineating the specific roles and responsibilities that are contained in the new functions. It is usually a mistake to just add these responsibilities to those already required of line managers. Therefore:

- ❑ Project responsibilities should be clearly delineated and separated from functional responsibilities. Wherever possible, these responsibilities should not be shared by the same individual.
- ❑ The roles of a project leader are quite different from those of a functional leader. In clarifying these roles, it is important to emphasize how they are **different, complimentary, and equally important** to attaining project success. Efforts should be made to minimize the perception of threat or power jockeying within each camp.
- ❑ In the project environment, much is accomplished by acceptance of the leaders by the project participants. Project direction is often accomplished by “knowledge power” rather than the traditional “position power.” In addition, project leaders often obtain

support via their ability to build alliances and via superior communication skills. Keep this in mind when selecting project management personnel.

- ❑ Another common characteristic of the project environment is delegation. Many efforts, and even responsibility for results, are delegated to various members of the project team. It is essential that the parties to each delegation action fully understand the extent of that delegation and the expectations of each party.

Training

None of the actions prescribed above can bear fruit without a comprehensive training program. This training goes well beyond the training in the use of the tools (such as the project management software).

There are several basic areas of training that must be provided for the people involved in the project management process, which may include:

GENERAL SKILLS FOR PROJECT MANAGERS (AND KEY PLAYERS)

- ❑ Presentation skills
- ❑ Communication skills
- ❑ Team building
- ❑ Decision making
- ❑ Problem solving
- ❑ Leadership skills
- ❑ Stress management
- ❑ Time management
- ❑ Organization and management theory

CORPORATE-SPECIFIC PRACTICES

- ❑ Understanding the organization
- ❑ Operating practices and procedures
- ❑ Specific roles and responsibilities

GENERAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE

- ❑ Principles and practices of project management
- ❑ What does project management software do
- ❑ Estimating, proposals and project initiation
- ❑ Techniques for project planning
- ❑ Role of the project manager

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USING THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE (PMS)

- Basic computer training
- Basic PMS training
- Using the PMS for your applications
- Application-specific formats and procedures
- System interfaces

Are These Really Necessary?

Are all of the above recommendations really required for the successful implementation of a computer-based project management capability? It is dangerous to take for granted that your people have any of these skills, or that your objectives will be met without them. Every time I have been called into a company to “fix” a project management software application, I have found that the majority of the problems were not directly attributed to the software itself. They nearly always fall into the categories listed above: lack of commitment, poorly defined roles and responsibilities, lack of essential skills, and misunderstanding of what the project management software does.

Do You Really Want Success?

Some time ago, I was called in to help a well respected NASA component who was experiencing problems with its project management software application. It seems that the plan being presented by the system was not reflecting the actual plan as desired by the project manager. Furthermore, reports being produced by the system were not getting the desired results.

Upon interviewing the participants in this process, I found two underlying problems. First, there was a widespread lack of knowledge about what the system did, and especially of what was done with the plans and data they entered into the system. Second, the framework (work breakdown structure) that was established within the system did not reflect the actual working breakdown used by the people who were planning their work. It wasn't really their fault. No one had bothered to provide an orientation on these principles. So how was anyone to know?

Even if the system had been outputting accurate and consistent planning information, it would have been lost on those who were targeted for the output. First, the system operators had failed to design good reports. They needed to identify who the project decision makers were, and what kind of information they needed to support that responsibility. Then they should have designed specific reports for each, containing the records that were appropriate to their action area. The reports should have been sorted in the most effective manner to facilitate analysis of the data and limited to the data elements needed to support their expected response.

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No one had bothered to indoctrinate the recipients of these data. You have to tell people how to read the reports and how to interpret the data. They need to know how to identify an out-of-tolerance condition, and what is expected of them in the way of a response.

In the case just illustrated, the situation was completely turned around by presenting two half-day workshops. As a result, the framework was changed, the input data was reconfigured to support the CPM process being employed, and the reports were redesigned to support the needs of the intended recipients. The participants were now able to understand how the process worked and what their role was in the process.

HEADING FOR SUCCESS!

Getting back to my experience with the company that I felt was proceeding with a worthy program to implement project management, here is what they were doing:

- ❑ An individual was assigned responsibility to lead in the design of the application, including system interfaces and configuration.
- ❑ That individual also set up standards and templates for using the selected project management software product. Although system users get product training, they do not have to design their own reports, forms, tables, filters, etc.
- ❑ A multifaceted training program was implemented. This included:
 1. A two-day series of lectures and workshops on the general skills that are useful in the project environment.
 2. A one-day seminar and workshop on the principles and practices of project management, including roles and responsibilities, and project initiation techniques. The workshop was customized for the client by having the consultant precede that effort with a day of interviewing and examining the company's methods and program.
 3. A two-day seminar in using the project management software.

It would appear that this firm has demonstrated the level of commitment essential to the successful implementation of the computer-based project management capability. And they have backed it up with a comprehensive indoctrination/training program.

Training and Commitment Make The Difference

The message here is a simple one. If you are going to invest in an improved project management capability, you should back that investment up with the training and commitment that is essential to make that investment pay off. A compromise in this area is very likely to lead to total failure of the effort.

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