Buying into the Vision

Selling IT project management to your organization

By Preston Cameron

Ask almost any participant in a project that has failed and he or she will be able to identify it in an instant. Ask executives if it creates problems for their organizations, and they'll probably tell you it's one of their top concerns. What is that one attribute common among the world's largest and most skill-laden firms that have had trouble implementing critical enterprise-wide system projects? The most common answer to all of these questions is the lack of effective project management.

There's no argument that effective project management can make or break a key IT project. But what is more startling to many managers and executives is how many organizations simply don't have a standardized process for managing their projects. In a survey of top IT executives, a majority of the respondents with recent successful implementations indicated that effective project managers had played a crucial role in their success. Conversely, a fair number of those organizations that had struggled through an implementation noted that weakness in their project management had contributed to their project's problems. An overwhelming majority said a good project manager was one of the most important resources on their project. Yet when asked if they had a standard project management philosophy and methodology used consistently throughout their organization in managing key projects, surprisingly few indicated that they were using project management reliably.

So, if project management is this important, why aren't more executives

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and managers insisting upon its effective widespread use? In most of these organizations, the cause can usually be traced to one of just a very few reasons. Most often, top executives don't understand what project management is and worse yet, they believe that their managers are already practicing it because otherwise, they wouldn't be managers. They also focus on a belief that it requires the use of new sophisticated technology to be effective and that this technology must be spread throughout their organization if they are to be successful. Hence, given all the other constraints an organization faces, it's not a priority.

Another area of difficulty can stem from the fact that different levels of an organization may be attempting to pool their project management efforts together, only to discover that their resulting project management requirements are very distinct. Sometimes the lack of effective project management can be traced to insufficient training or simply because there is no project management plan or process that is being followed. The most significant explanation, however, is also the most basic: no one within the company is actively selling the benefits of project management internally to the remainder of the organization.

Selling the benefits of project management to your organization has to be an ongoing process if your organization is to be successful in implementing today's e-business and IT initiatives. The responsibility for buying into a comprehensive project management process must occur simultaneously at several levels within your organization. There are three levels of key customers who will need to buy into the use of project management if the project is to be successful.

The executive suite must get behind the concept of project management and understand how and why it is one of the most important things that the people who are responsible for projects should be doing. The strategic level of project management, those mid-level managers that are currently attempting it, have to get behind the plan or the key expertise needed won't be on board. The tactical level or front-line management of the organization has to give their consent, or a project will wallow in anarchy as the largest number of project managers either overtly or covertly rebel. So, how can you develop a process to sell project management that will garner the support of not only these key customers but also everyone

in your organization? Here's a plan that might help.

When considering the implementation of a consistent process for project management in your IT organization, you first need to assess your organization's overall project environment and your readiness for project management. A good place to start is by understanding the level of senior management support. If there is no common understanding by your senior management of what project management really is, or of the benefits that it can provide, then there is limited hope of installing a co-ordinated project management system and improving your project management performance. Also, consider taking a project inventory, where every project in your organization is reviewed for status and against some performance metrics. Identify the common attributes of successful and unsuccessful projects and catalog them against the benefits you've established for your organization-wide project management system. You will uncover examples of good and bad project management, but more importantly, you will have gathered valuable information to help you support your justification. Also, look for a senior management mentor who can help you champion the benefits to the rest of your organization. Every organization will have at least one, and they probably won't be the first person you approach with this concept.

Once you've taken your organization's project management temperature, you should consider looking at your organization's project selection process. For example, consider how projects are selected within your organization today. Do you have an organized evaluation process for deciding which projects you will undertake? Do you actually have a formal process for selecting and prioritizing who will manage the projects that are chosen? Historical evidence about your organization's project selection process will tell you a lot about your readiness for project management. Believe it or not, this evaluation process is one that can make the

difference between an organization's survival and failure. Imagine an organization that chooses its IT projects simply by virtue of circumstance, perceived media importance, or worse yet because everybody is doing it, and then ends up with a situation in which the projects that they've selected cannot be completed successfully with the skill sets that are available.

A project selection process can include whatever criteria you desire but at a minimum, it must consider some kind of cost/benefit analysis. Since you've already looked at your historical experience with projects, you'll want also to include some kind of risk assessment. Such an analysis can assist you when you're matching fundamental project management requirements against the skill sets available to your organization. If your organization has a standardized process for selecting projects, then challenge your use of project management against those same criteria that you use for selecting new projects. Document the costs and benefits, risks, and key business drivers that an organization-wide project management system can provide, and whether or not you have the skills to support them.

Don't be surprised if you need to develop your upper management's abilities in managing your project managers. The number of organizations with project management as an established priority is few and far between, but as soon as someone mentions it, the usefulness of a structured management of project managers becomes glaringly obvious. Are your project managers managed consistently? Are the criteria for evaluating the performance of the projects themselves defined and consistently applied to each project? The time for doing this is long before the obvious critical

project gets started. Once an organization is deep in the bowels of a substantial IT project and the heat is on, it becomes very difficult to change the rules on how project managers are to be managed. Examine how your organization manages its managers and develop a program of training upper management on how to manage your project managers. Better yet, include the project managers themselves in the training to secure additional buy-in for the process.

Once you've gotten your upper management onboard and trained, it's time to establish a project manager development program. If it hasn't occurred to you by now, the importance of recognizing project management as a skill to be treasured can make all the difference in the world to an organization's success. As soon as that obvious connection is recognized, the need for a formal development program for project managers becomes a no-brainer. Your project management-training program doesn't need to be very extensive to start with. Any program you can develop with an emphasis on the basic attributes will get you started and it can set the stage for future refinements in your program.

An essential element of any program should be budgeting time and money for your project managers to improve themselves. It's one thing to launch a new initiative, and quite another to require your managers to make time to participate. Many organizations encourage their managers to keep current in their management skill sets but don't allow time for that update to take place.

Finally, make project management a career position. As obvious and simplistic as it might sound, you would be surprised how many organizations consider project management as just

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another part of senior management's responsibilities. Creating an opportunity for good project managers to develop their skills as a career brings a kind of recognition that creates pay back in two ways. First, you'll attract the best project managers to these positions. It's surprising to many organizations how radically they achieve increases in project performance because of securing better project managers. Second, your project managers will gradually become more and more effective if they believe that they have a career with a future. And admit it, the one constant in every organization is that new projects come along while old ones retire. There simply is no such thing as a "project-free" organization. Usually, when a new project comes up either the employee with the least to do is thrown at the problem or the project manager is selected as a reward for past performance by the organization's upper management. Consequently, not enough time, attention skill gets paid to the management of the project, or the project dies before it ever gets the chance to take off. Not surprisingly, upper management often does not realize the impact a trained project manager can have on the outcome of a project.

Without a receptive environment to support it, any project management system you try to implement has almost no chance of success. That's why iden-

tifying your key internal customers, devising a strategy for selling the benefits of project management and assessing your project management environment are essential. And remember: it's never too late to start. While you may not be able to alter your entire corporate culture to accommodate the needs of current projects, starting on a

process to garner support from senior management for the benefits of a project management system will help to deliver the rest of the structure you will need over time.

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