

Synopsis or brief excerpt

Project Management is one of those processes that, if left unattended, will encourage bureaucratic behavior. But, if used effectively, Project Management techniques can be the most effective tool to wade through the bureaucratic business model.

Bypass The Bureaucracy

Using Project Management Techniques to Avoid Bogged Down Projects

By David Brandon

I am a bureaucrat. It is true. I am a non-elected government official; part of a government characterized by specialization of functions, adherence to fixed rules, and a hierarchy of authority. A bureaucracy, by definition, is characterized by officialism, red tape and proliferation. An inevitable consequence of the expansion of governmental functions has been the rise of bureaucracy. Indeed, with elected officials changing relatively rapidly, it is the bureaucratic model that allows government functions to subsist without jeopardizing the services it provides.

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THE BUREAUCRATIC BUSINESS MODEL

Organizations often assume the characteristics of their leadership. So government organizations often assume the characteristics of its leadership: politicians. I believe all projects are political. But in the public sector, Government agencies are driven by political objectives. I no longer question why so many government projects fail – it starts at the top.

The characteristics of bureaucracy were first formulated in a systematic manner by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), whose definition and theories set the foundations for all subsequent work on the subject. They refer to (1) the division of labor in the organization, (2) its authority structure, (3) the position and role of the individual member, and (4) the type of rules that govern the system itself. The American Robert K. Merton was among the first sociologists to emphasize systematically the now-familiar side of the bureaucratic picture—its red tape and inefficiency. According to Merton, the reliability and predictability of the bureaucrat's behavior is based on the predominance of rules to control all activities. In other words; reliability and predictability are implemented at the cost of flexibility.

I hope the Project Manager has some influence into this process. The Project Manager has been selected to oversee a specific outcome and will be successful when h/she eliminates obstacles (also known as “red tape”) on a regular basis. Here are some questions I asked myself:

- How can a career Project Manager influence the bureaucratic model?
- How can the Project Manager achieve outcomes in a quick manner?
- How can a Project Manager avoid the lengthy effort to generate consensus on every decision?
- How can the Project Manager effectively manage his/her project with too many stakeholders?

WAYS TO SQUASH BUREAUCRATIC OBSTACLES

I identified five specific ways to eliminate the bureaucratic obstacles in my way. I have found conscientious attention to these mechanisms greatly improves the success rate of my projects. I address each of these areas specifically in my Project Plan and follow them in detail. Try it. It really does work!

1) Reduce the Number of Meetings

I hate meetings. They are often inefficient and do not achieve the desired outcomes. Tell me, how many meetings have you called to resolve an issue, only to have more issues take its place? For issue resolution, I do not include all the stakeholders. I have one-on-one meetings. Everyone doesn't need to be involved in every issue.

Regular status meetings are imperative. They're great. But make sure you are providing status – not calling a work session. Providing status is one-way communication from the Project Manager to the stakeholders. (The generic term “stakeholders” is to include customers, project directors, product managers and others that would be included in the status meetings.) Make sure your status meetings communicate status and are NOT work sessions.

The best way to reduce the number of meetings is to obtain approval via email. I do not call a meeting to “discuss” a deliverable. I want each individual to review the deliverable from their own perspective and provide feedback. That usually does not require a face-to-face meeting and almost never requires a large group meeting. However, many projects use the Status Meeting (the only time every month they actually see the stakeholders) as the opportunity to discuss and approve each deliverable. This activity is very important, but can be streamlined by using email. More on this later.

2) Stakeholder Management

The more people involved, the harder it is to achieve consensus. Also, each individual brings with them their own perspective. Don't get me wrong. I am all in favor of different perspectives. But I find that too many perspectives slow down the real objective.

Remember, “specialization of functions” is one of the primary characteristics of a bureaucracy. So I can almost always count on at least one representative from each “specialized function” to have an active role on my project. Another characteristic of a bureaucracy, though, is the level of internal competition between functions. The easiest way to avoid the bureaucracy on projects is to reduce the number of stakeholders. At the lowest level, you will have more stakeholders than if you climb up the organizational chart a few levels. I do this by getting buy-in from the highest level possible and then engaging that person’s peers.

I use executive influence to reduce the number of stakeholders. The CFO is not going to send a lowly manager to be a stakeholder when the CIO is at the meetings. The CFO sees the CIO as a peer and will act accordingly. I use this internal competition to my advantage. Once I engage a senior executive, I make that fact known clearly throughout my organization. You’ll be surprised how many executives now want to be a project stakeholder.

Bureaucrat Scenario		Defensive Tactic
Scenario 1:	My stakeholder has had the deliverable in their hands for several weeks. But when I ask for approval, the answer is “I just haven’t gotten around to it yet.”	Provide a date certain for review and approval. Silence is acceptance.
Scenario 2:	My stakeholder rejects my deliverable – flatly – without reason or justification.	Disapproval must be accompanied by what specific modifications would result in approval.
Scenario 3:	I obtain deliverable approval, but a stakeholder later changes their position.	Acceptance is acceptance. Subsequent changes are submitted as a Change Request. (However, all stakeholders are allowed to change position prior to the date certain provided.)
Scenario 4:	I obtain deliverable approval, but a stakeholder’s boss doesn’t formally approve the deliverable.	The Project Management Plan Stakeholder Management section clearly states that each stakeholder designee is acting on behalf of the stakeholder and represents that functional area. (The boss has delegated authority and must stick to it.)

Of course, the CFO, CIO and other “C”-level executives cannot put my project at their top priority all the time. So I ask each major stakeholder to designate someone to act on their behalf. This gives the stakeholder authority by delegation. Every stakeholder knows that each person’s vote carries the weight of their boss.

I modify my project estimate depending on the number of stakeholders. I usually assume eight stakeholders will be involved. For each additional stakeholder, I add two percent (2%) of the Project Budget into the Contingency estimate. This accommodates the more complex project organizational structure, a more complex Project Communication Plan, additional Change Requests, and additional one-on-one meetings.

Inevitably, someone will feel left out. There's a functional division that thinks they are a major stakeholder, but you know their involvement will not positively influence your project. Or they may block your progress on purpose (public sector organizations never have that, do they?) To play nice, I include that functional division as an additional stakeholder, but not a primary stakeholder. For example, they may be invited to meetings, but have no voting privileges. They may have no deliverable approval authority. I have all these roles defined in the Project Management Plan or the Project Charter.

Yes, the Project Charter. This is a document that is often seen only as the authorization to execute a project. However, I use the Project Charter as my initial Stakeholder Management tool. This is where the primary stakeholders are named. Use it to your advantage to more effectively manage your stakeholders.

3) Reduce the Number of Change Requests Requiring Management Approval

This is a simple trick if it is clearly spelled out in the Configuration Management Plan, Change Control Plan and/or Project Management Plan. If the Change Request is, say, less than one percent (1%) of the total project budget (in terms of hours or dollars), then the Project Manager (me) has the authority to implement the Change Request at his/her discretion. That way, small, immaterial changes do not preoccupy management's time. They only see the Change Requests that may impact the schedule or budget significantly.

You may wish to implement a multi-layered threshold. The Project Director may have discretion up to five percent (5%). The project sponsor or customer (whoever is paying for the project) may have up to ten percent (10%). This way, you only need stakeholder consensus on those Change Requests that have an impact over ten percent (10%).

Remember, however, that this authority must be thoroughly spelled out during the planning stage. Your organization may not be ready to provide the Project Manager or Project Director with budgetary authority. This type of authority is typical only of mature project-centered organizations. But it cannot hurt to ask.

4) Simplify Deliverable Review & Approval

I usually have four different scenarios that plague deliverable review and approval: Most executives hate the "Silence is Acceptance" rule. You are blatantly stating that you expect an executive to act within your schedule – not the other way around. Of course, you also have a Project Charter that clearly states your timeframe. So when that executive complains or fails to respond within the stated timeframe, you can clearly respond "then my project will be late." Remember, you are the project manager – appointed by the authority of the Project Charter. Don't let stakeholders manage you. You need to manage them. This is hard for many Project Managers, but this hard-headed behavior is characteristic of the most successful Project Managers.

Disapproval or a simple rejection of a deliverable is not enough. Disapproval must be accompanied by what modifications would result in approval. This is a common

bureaucratic trick; disapprove the deliverable to stall for time (maybe to help your competing initiative.) If you insist on specific reasons for disapproval, eventually these back-door tricks will backfire on them. Also, changes to deliverables after the date certain will be a change request. That will provide your stakeholders the incentive to be on time the next go-round. And while we're on the topic of scope management, make sure your scope statement states what is in scope and what is not in scope.

Use email technology to deliver work products, request approval (by a certain date/time), and also confirm delivery. In my experience, if you email a deliverable to stakeholders for their review PRIOR to the meeting, they will start looking at it DURING the meeting. So, simply provide the deliverable with comments and approval response due on a date certain. Remember, no response is acceptance. The email thread becomes your proof of delivery and of stakeholder expectations should you need that proof later.

Be hard-headed with these defense tactics. Yes, these people are often your boss (or your boss's boss and her peers.) Once you let one individual circumvent the rules, they all will. Similarly, if you have approval from all but one stakeholder, you can use that influence to obtain approval from holdouts.

5) Include a Product Acceptance Plan in your Project Management Plan

Successfully obtaining acceptance of the program Deliverables depends on the clarity of scope definition and the level of expectation management. I have found a clear Product Acceptance Plan, a distinct section in the Project Management Plan, helps immensely. A sample Product Acceptance Plan can be found below.

SAMPLE PRODUCT ACCEPTANCE PLAN

Many practices presented in your Project Management Plan, such as Stage Containment, Stakeholder Management, Change Control and Scope Control, are based on a single premise: "Obtain Formal Acceptance of Deliverables." The primary goal of Product Acceptance is to review deliverables and results to ensure that all were completed correctly and satisfactorily. Acceptance of interim deliverables is obtained during the Control Project Work Activity as the deliverables are completed. However, further formal acceptance of all final deliverables may be required at the completion of the project. If so, formal acceptance sign-off from designated stakeholders (e.g., sponsors and business representatives or their designees) on all deliverables transferred is required. This sign-off documents the fact that the final deliverables meet or exceed the quality verification criteria defined in the Quality Plan.

Every major deliverable will be required to go to the primary project stakeholders for formal acceptance and sign-off of deliverables. However, the following documents the steps each project must follow to obtain acceptance.

Acceptance Step 1 - Provide Deliverable(s)

Documents, such as plans, specifications, technical documentation, drawings, etc, produced to describe the project's products must be available for review. The Project Manager must provide the deliverables (or documents describing work products) to the stakeholders.

Acceptance Step 2 - Inspection

The stakeholders will have a specified time frame to review the deliverables (or documents describing the work products.) As necessary, the stakeholders may request further inspection by Subject Matter Experts, Functional Team Members, or other stakeholders. Obtaining inspection by those stakeholders is the responsibility of that stakeholder. If comments or rejection is not obtained by the date specific, silence will be deemed acceptance. The project schedule cannot afford delays to do lack of attention by the stakeholders. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that stakeholders give their necessary attention to deliverable inspection.

Acceptance Step 3 - Formal Acceptance

Each stakeholder will either accept or reject the inspected deliverables. Rejected items may require re-work to bring the deliverable into compliance with requirements or specifications. However, any items rejected and requiring re-work must be carefully reviewed to ensure the non-compliance is not out of scope. If it is out of scope, the re-work should be submitted as a Change Request. (See Change Control Procedures.) Flat rejection is not acceptable: the rejection notice must contain a listing of modifications that would bring the deliverable into compliance. Formal Acceptance will be documented by physical sign-off or email acceptance from the stakeholder. Any documentation used as part of the acceptance procedure (e.g., sign-off sheets, checklists, etc.) will become part of the project's records. Acceptance criteria may include the following guidelines:

- Are deliverables complete and documented (e.g., do they meet program documentation standards?)
- Do software deliverables comply with Coding and Development Standards?
- Does the deliverable clearly identify how the requirements or specifications have been met?
- Have the plans been revised for the next task based on information learned during the current task?

Acceptance Step 4 - Closeout

If the deliverables represent the final work products of a project, acceptance will trigger the Milestone: Approval for Successful Project Completion. The activities for a closeout include:

- Obtain formal management acceptance of the business project delivered.
- Archive deliverables, documentation and other materials for future use.
- Release all remaining human and physical resources to their providing organizations/owners.
- Transfer ownership of the project to the customer, if applicable.

I am a bureaucrat. But I am also a Project Manager. I have used these Best Practices successfully in my government agencies. I have proven that a Project Manager can influence the bureaucratic model by achieving outcomes in a quick manner, avoiding the long consensus-building process and effectively managing stakeholders.

About the Author

David Brandon is a Project Manager at the Texas Health & Human Services Commission, Project Management Competency Center in Austin, Texas. He has over 13 years experience directing and managing multiple, simultaneous information technology projects for the State of Texas. He is PMP certified through PMI certified and holds the PMO Certificate of Added Qualification from PMI.

