

Common Sense Isn't Overhead

By

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At a recent Project Management Institute (PMI – Buffalo, NY) conference attendees made an informal attempt to identify the number one problem encountered while managing medium to large projects in a typical corporate environment. Surprisingly, the problem identified had nothing to do with the technology used in the PM process. The problem was incredibly mundane, and based on the input from most of the heated roundtable discussions, pervasive in the extreme.

The attendees lamented that little, if any, time was budgeted for the collection and entering of weekly status updates into their PM systems. It seems that in most organizations, “Project tracking to plan” is categorized as undesirable “overhead”. As a consequence of this, it is almost impossible to make midstream corrections to the project, which results in missed deadlines and cost overruns.

To avoid these problems, project managers steal time, work late, and sneak time from one task and another to ensure that tracking to plan takes place. They resent having to become burglars to manage their projects professionally.

To understand the error of our ways, we need to step back to square one. PM is comprised of three components. “Planning and Execution” and comparing real world progress against that plan. Good project management requires that sufficient time is allocated to all components.

The planning and execution component is complex. Estimating how much effort is necessary to complete a task; allocating appropriate resources to deliver that effort; deploying those resources into multiple parallel processes to meet a single, final, fixed deadline; and handling those infernal people issues which arise whenever people and egos come within close proximity to each other. None of this is easy. Juggling feral cats and nitroglycerine cocktails, while balancing sanity on the tip of your nose... that is easy. PM is exceedingly difficult.

It takes a tremendous amount of effort, and an equal amount of skill to accomplish all of the above. We recognize all of the above and because of recognition, we budget the time to complete it. So far so good.

The other component of PM is the tracking of progress against the plan. Compared to everything we've already covered, this not only sounds easy, it is relatively easy. All we need do is track and report project status. That doesn't take much time, nor does it require any extraordinary skills. Therefore, as illustrated by the PMI attendees, the common practice is that we don't budget time for this component of PM.

How important is tracking to plan? Before we consider the perhaps overly obvious answer, let's summarize with an analogy. Have you ever boiled a pot of milk? The time it

takes to boil milk varies according to the temperature of the stovetop, the amount and starting temperature of the milk, the conductivity and shape of the pot, and even room temperature. It's a simple task... all we have to do is take the pot off the stove as it begins to boil. Right?

If you've ever boiled milk, then you've learned something very important about Project Management. Boiling milk, without having it boil over onto the heating element and stinking up the whole house, requires our constant attention to what's going on in the pot. We can't read a book while doing it. We can't answer the door while doing it, and we don't dare pick up the phone while doing it. If we do, we end up with a stinky kitchen. The moment we take our eyes away from that pot, the milk boils and bubbles over.

Like tracking a real project to a plan, checking the pot doesn't take a lot of time, just a millisecond glance every five – ten seconds will do the job, but those repeated glances are necessary. If we fail to give this simplest of tasks special attention then our boiling milk project fails.

Regardless of the time it takes to track progress against the plan, we cannot ignore, or short change this task. If it's not done properly, with due diligence, then we're not managing the project. I'm unsure of what we think we're doing, but it isn't PM. PM is all about creating a plan and then executing it. We don't know if we're executing it properly without comparing actuals to the plan.

Next to planning the project, tracking the project is the most important PM activity. To state it even more plainly; everything done in the name of PM, is done to make it possible to track progress otherwise we will miss the set deadlines. To invest the effort in the planning stage and then not track our progress is _____ (Insert favourite expletive deleted phrase here)

Not allowing time in the plan to track and report progress against the plan, is to announce publicly that our PM activities are a farce... something we do to merely 'look' like professionals. The solution is obvious; learn what we can from the simple act of boiling milk.

(c) 2006 Peter de Jager - Peter is a Keynote Speaker, writer and consultant focusing on issues relating to Change Management and the Future. You can contact him at pdejager@technobility.com and visit him at www.technobility.com.

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