



## Project Management The role of relationships

### Tales from the Project Frontline: Lessons learned so you don't have to!

I remember a time, back in the old days, when project management was done by project managers whilst the rest of us looked on, or not, as the case may be, with varying degree of interest. Today's landscape is different. It's now not so much a distinct discipline or function. In many organisations, project management is thought of as a core skill or 'competency' – a fundamental way of working.

For sure, the reasoning is noble: after all, who would argue with the logic of trying to make all work across an organisation more structured and organised, with defined outcomes and clear plans by which to navigate? Unfortunately, the reality is somewhat less rosy with our best laid plans often at risk of going horribly awry.

An obvious cause is that it's unrealistic to expect to make project managers of us all – it takes a particular set of skills and, one might argue, character. Beyond this, there are a number of reasons why many organisations end up in rescue mode with an over-budget, over-time, nightmare of a project or programme –

Take, for example, the technology company whose profit forecasts relied on the design of bespoke software, shaped to the specification of a key client. You can bet your bottom dollar that the planning was meticulous, the Gantt chart enormous and the detail teased out to the nth degree. Unfortunately for them, they hadn't truly understood the needs and expectations of their client, nor realised that different expectations existed within the client stakeholder group and which had been neither surfaced nor aligned. The result? A huge investment in something that didn't meet the (hidden) key needs of their client organisation, thus leaving them with months of expensive rework and a fractured, vulnerable client relationship.

Another emerging school of thought is to do with the perils of over-planning. The Kurt Lewin model of change, dating back some 70+ years talked about 'unfreezing' the organisation, doing the change (or project) then re-freezing. Seriously though: in this day and age how relevant can this be? Organisations are evolving all the time with the internal and external parameters shifting before our very eyes. The 2-year detailed project plan is all very well and yes, we might put it together on the basis that it will change, but the psychological impact of constant planning and re-planning is pretty negative –

One hospital, faced with the need for longitudinal change, recognised this issue and developed a true collaboration between the project team and its complex web of internal and external customers. By agreeing together the key measures of success and a flexible timeframe for delivery, they were able to ensure that everyone's needs were met on an on-going basis without becoming slaves to a 4ft x 8ft Gantt chart on the wall.

Of course, sometimes it can all go wrong even when you think you've got it right. Any change expert will have a tale to tell about the amount of time and energy a client will spend on absolutely anything but addressing the real issues – if doing so means having a Difficult Conversation. Unfortunately the same laws apply to customer-supplier project relationships –



Take the web hosting firm who thought that their million-pound contract with a price comparison company was all sewn up ready to renew, only to find that the business was being taken elsewhere. Cue furious pants-dropping in the price department, only after which did the hosting firm realise that it was in fact their complacency towards the relationship that caused the problem. Key stakeholders had changed, requirements had shifted and relationships had not been rebuilt. This was one of the 70% of non-renewals across the board that happened because of a service issue, not because of price or anything else in the original contract terms.



Probably the most important point in all of this is that problems and glitches don't have to mean loss of business. In fact, handled right, such issues can provide the opportunity to shine in an increasingly commoditised world. What if you and your client acknowledged and discussed the issues openly and without blame? What if together you could agree what 'good' looks like and a workable way ahead? What if you were able to not only deliver on 'good', but go above and beyond to 'excellent'? With the right approach this is more than possible and the net result is a delighted and emotionally committed client who not only stays but comes back for more.

Bottom line – in every sense – is that it's all about understanding and managing the relationships with those who are working on, influencing, or impacted by the project.

It's looking at project management through a lens of human dynamics. After all, what else is a project other than a finite piece of coordinated work, requiring the input and/or cooperation of a number of different people?

Here's the rub though: human beings are complex creatures. They can say one thing and do another. They may have drivers and agendas that are not obvious and which you'd never guess. They may share their ideas or keep things close.

Getting underneath all of this is essential and that, I would argue, is the role of the project manager who has to have the skills and tools to do this well.

Understanding and surfacing the true drivers, expectations and – crucially – intent of the people who matter to the work, be they internal colleagues or external clients, is the key to getting it right whilst your graphs, charts and measurements sit in the background monitoring the mechanics.

Successful projects need to ask their customers the RIGHT questions, in order to get the right success factors in the first place, and sit that firmly on a bedrock of commitment, communication and engagement.

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