

Has “project” become a dirty word?

With press full of stories of project failure, you could be forgiven for thinking that “project” is a dirty word in many organisations. However, Tony Teague argues that success is not difficult to achieve if we learn the lessons of the past and apply a few basic rules to all new projects.

As a professional project & programme manager it concerns me that “project” might have become a dirty word!

One seldom reads about project success, yet so much is written about project failure that one could be tempted to think that it might be best to leave projects to mere chance rather than to apply the disciplines of project management.

Poorly managed projects reflect badly upon the organisations that initiate them and equally upon the project profession.

Millions of pounds are invested in projects annually and the lessons of failure are copiously documented, so one is left wondering why do things not improve?

My experience, derived from working with some of the biggest organisations and projects, is that the wrong problems are being addressed on two fronts:

1. Organisations fail to manage their project portfolios as the route to delivery of their strategy, and at the same time under invest in the capabilities, skills and processes which will ensure consistent project success, whilst
2. Project professionals tend to find greater comfort in improving processes and acquiring ever more sophisticated tools, rather than addressing the human factors that go to the root of most project failures

In order to address each of these topics in turn it is necessary to understand what goes on from the moment an organisation commissions a new initiative through to delivery, or non-delivery as the case may be.

At Human Systems, we see consistent project success as being attributable to three distinct levels of commitment that involve three sets of interactions which must take place continually and in parallel. Each of these levels calls for involvement at different levels within the organisational hierarchy, and they reflect:

1. How the projects are managed at detailed level – “Doing Projects Right”
2. How projects are chosen and scoped – “Doing the Right Project”, and
3. How the organisation has developed its skills, culture and processes in order to “Consistently do the Right Projects Right”



The ‘organisational’ causes of failure highlighted above tend to be concentrated within the top two tiers of this three-tier framework. They can be typified as:

- A tendency to initiate more projects than available resources can cope with
- A tendency not to ensure that projects are driven by organisational strategy
- The lack of a mechanism for optimising the overall project portfolio
- A tendency to set timescales, budgets and resources in stone before similar constraints have been applied to deliverables, scope and benefits
- A failure to understand the very different skill sets and objectives that surround the management of projects as opposed to operational management
- A failure to value longer term investment in the development of organisational delivery capability

There are of course many other, more specific causes of project failure, however, addressing those listed would represent a good start for the majority of organisations!

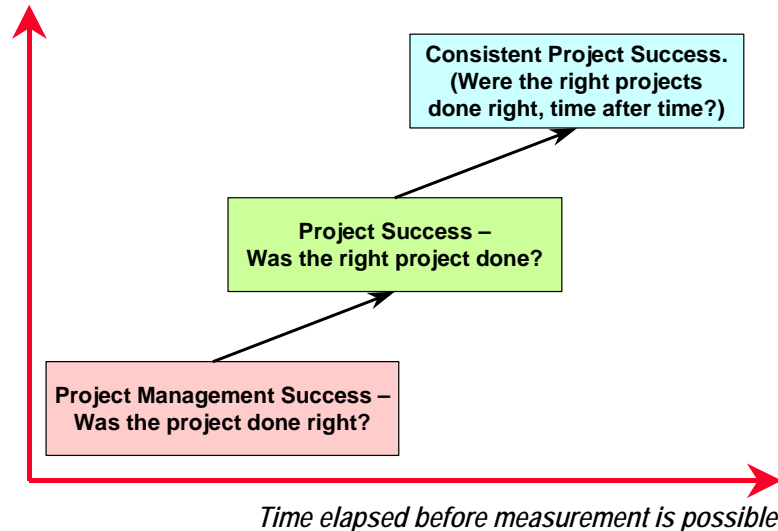
Turning to the ‘professional’ contributors to the problem, my perception is that at worst, the technical aspects of project processes and tools represent a comfort zone into which project ‘anoraks’ retreat at the first sign of difficulty!



Organisational Commitment required for consistent Project Success

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Level of Hierarchy Required to give Commitment.



Time elapsed before measurement is possible.

Whilst I do not wish to denigrate my professional colleagues, recent Human Systems' research shows that the key capabilities for consistent, successful project delivery are:

- Clarity of vision or goal
- Well defined scope, deliverables & business case
- Fully resourced, competent and empowered project team

Processes, methods and tools are simply not in the top tier in terms of significance.

This is, of course, far from saying that a disciplined approach to project management is not important; structure, method and quality control are all important and tools have their place, but as with most things in life it is the people that can let you down!

Returning to the three-tier framework shown above, people related issues abound at all levels and include:

- A tendency for organisations to take 'good managers' and assume they can become project managers
- A weakness for applying 'whoever is easiest to release' to mission critical projects rather than those best equipped to ensure success
- Top management's delusion that project management skills require training, whilst project sponsor behaviours do not
- A lack of understanding that failure to fully resource a project from Day 1 will cause instant slippage that is unlikely to be recovered
- A tendency in large organisations to allow 'silo behaviour' to get in the way of important cross-functional project decisions and progress

- A tendency for senior management to insist their 'pet' project is 'green' whilst all involved know it is a dark shade of 'red'

Again, there are of course many other people-related issues that can cause project difficulties, but addressing these will ensure a sound footing!

So what help can be given to an organisation that recognises some of the 'symptoms' that I have described? Well, as with any illness, recognising the symptoms is the first step towards treatment and recovery!

Human Systems offers a Corporate Delivery Assessment service which is coupled to a comparative benchmark based upon 10 years of data from organisations around the world and from all sectors. Assessment in this way not only offers a fast-track route to identification of the key issues requiring attention, but can also be used as the basis for subsequent measurement of the improvement obtained.

Of course, it may be simpler to blame the project manager for failure, but the forward looking organisation may prefer to consider how to improve its delivery capability and avoid the next disaster!

We at Human Systems remain dedicated to **Enhancing Delivery Capability** and to **Demonstrating Results**, and ultimately of course, to disassociating the word 'project' from the word 'failure'! ➡

About the author

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