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Action Tracking: a Strategic Process for All Large Complex Projects that Can Easily be Centralized and Rationalized

Large complex projects run a number of processes in parallel. They all produce numerous actions which prioritization and timely closure is essential to the success of the project. Still most projects do not centralize these actions and do not prioritize them effectively. Having a good grip on the actions to be taken and effectively prioritizing them would increase significantly the effectiveness of project leadership. Centralized action tracking and prioritization is a way to increase project management effectiveness significantly and that can easily be implemented.

Actions come from everywhere

Most internal control & monitoring management processes run by project management teams aim at producing actions:

- Correspondence receipt and action assignment;
- Document creation and reviews;
- Project risk management;
- Interface management;
- Change management;
- Regular coordination meetings and other coordination processes;
- Reporting processes;
- Minutes of meeting with stakeholders;
- Etc.

Once they have been defined, these actions need to be formalized and communicated to the relevant person in charge. This person in turn often needs to prioritize the high number of actions assigned to him/her to be able to proceed with his/her work.

Those two processes – communication of action and prioritization at the personal level are generally neglected while they are very significant contributors to project success: what serves to prioritize risk mitigation actions if the person receiving the actions is not aware of them, or not aware of their importance for the project? Still in our consulting assignments we find again and again that these processes are not identified as important and are not managed accordingly:

- Persons in charge are not aware of the actions they are responsible for, or forget that they need to take some action later in the project
- People are left to themselves to prioritize the actions they are in charge of, which often leads them to choose to do the easiest first, which are not necessarily the ones that are critical for the project.

The solution: centralize and rationalize actions

The objective of an action management process would be to centralize all the actions that need to be taken by the team, including proper information about their criticality from the original process that produced the action. This will then allow to have a sound overview of the situation, identify who is overloaded, and guide decision-making as to the prioritization of actions at the individual level.

This might sound a bit heavy but such an action centralization process is essential in a large, complex project due to the sheer number of such actions that need to be taken up by some part of the project team.

The alternative is to have each of the process owners of the action-generating processes go around to check whether action have been taken – which is a very inefficient and time-consuming process. In addition there is no guarantee that the most important actions for the project – which are often also the most difficult – have been addressed as a matter of priority.

The tool: a centralized action database

The solution we support, based on our experience and observations, is for the project to set up a centralized action database which would concentrate in one place all the actions that are decided at the project level. It allows to filter those actions by date, person in charge, package, initial importance, process that generated the action or any other filter that the project wants to implement, as long as the database has been structured in an appropriate way.

By reviewing reports from this database, project management can then instantly monitor the health of the action implementation; challenge project team members on their personal prioritization and action resolution rate; and in general, be much more in control to ensure that the important (and generally hardest) actions are effectively been taken in a timely manner.

Modern technology allows to implement such a centralized action database easily, with even the possibility to add in to all the other tools a button that generates an action in the action database. A person then needs to be specifically designated to administer this database; this person in general can be chosen among the Project Controls personnel.

Prioritization of actions is key

What is really key in the process is to make sure that the actions that are really important for the success of the project, should it be either an action mitigation action or some anticipation action, are effectively implemented in a timely manner. To achieve that it is important that the project management team has a view at any time on what are the top 5 or 10 actions that need to be taken at the present moment. These actions will receive proper attention, and once closed, can be replaced by the next action in line.

In our consulting assignments we generally encounter weak prioritization processes, and one of our main contributions is often to challenge the project management team to determine its actual priorities.

Prioritization is difficult because it means letting go of non-priority actions (or delaying their treatment); this might make some team members and stakeholders unhappy. Yet in any organization and project there are only a handful of actions that will really change its fate. They are often difficult and challenging, but if overcome will open the road to great success.

Ensure that the project team is effectively working on what's really important at the present moment. That's all what will make the success of the project

Conclusion: keep control of actions implementation!

It is vital for project leaders to stay in control of what actions are being taken in the project. For large, complex projects, the

amounts of action items that will be generated will be mind-blowing. Only a systematic process supported by an adequate IT-based system will allow the proper follow-up to ensure that the project team is effectively working on what's really important at the present moment. That's all what will make the success of the project.



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Executing Large, Complex projects.

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