White Paper 2013-02

Stop Taking Change as an Exception:
The Need for Agile Project Planning

In project delivery, in particular for complex projects, change is not an exception. It is rather the rule. Most of the project management effort is actually spent in managing deviations and change to the initial plan. How come, then, that project delivery processes are usually designed to manage change as an exception? Would it not be more effective and powerful to design project delivery processes around change and agility as a core component?

The reality of project delivery success is about agility

Most project management models and related processes are designed around a progressive, linear project delivery, where processes are supposed to deliver predictable results, one after the other. Change is generally vilified as something to avoid – in particular to avoid the too frequent scope creep, to avoid rework and to maximize efficiency.

However, every project practitioner knows that in real projects, things never happen that way. Unplanned and unexpected events occur, changes are brought in by stakeholders, natural events or by the very characteristics of project delivery, iterations need to be done to come up with the right solution. Often the project manager himself introduces additional change on top of the change to mitigate its impact, through re-sequencing of activities.

What makes the difference when it comes to project success is often more how agile the organization was to account for these changes and review its project execution strategy and tactics; and not whether it forcefully managed to bring the situation back to the baseline plan.

In particular, the last steps to project completion and the last contributors to project delivery – construction and commissioning – are those that need to demonstrate the maximum agility to allow the project to be delivered. They often have to re-plan continuously to take into account changes in delivery dates and readiness dates of different components of the project. Experienced project practitioners know that for construction and commissioning, flexibility and agility within a framework that guarantees control and safety is the appropriate management response that successful projects implement consistently.

Project management process reloaded

In the IT industry, a set of project management practices called Agile Project Management already accounts for the need to be very flexible when it comes to software development, with frequent reviews and updates of the planned activities, taking into account the discoveries done by the team during the project delivery (software

coding, in that case, which is quite a creative and difficult to predict endeavour).

Contrary to the common belief, large complex projects need also to be agile – possibly with a lesser frequency than IT projects but often with much large possible impacts in terms of cost and schedule.

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Why not, then, design the project delivery process around agility rather than around trying to stick by all means to a set baseline?

Obviously the project delivery process should not fall into the trap of an ever changing plan and uncontrolled creep in scope, time, quality or cost; and a baseline is always an important reference to come back to, that enables performance comparison and measurement. Still, there are some ways to design project delivery processes that take change, and subsequent agile re-planning, as a normal event in project delivery.

Upending the project delivery process

Let us consider now as a thought experiment that in fact, the main scope of project management is actually to manage change and deviations to the plan. That establishing and executing the baseline plan is only a very small, easy part of project management.

There is a threshold for changes and variances beyond which no particular action is required – it is when small variances happen that do not put in question the general logic of the execution plan. However should any deviation or change happen that steps beyond this threshold, immediate action ought to be taken. In this instance, reactivity is the most important factor to consider: the actual ripple effect of the event needs to be assessed quickly to understand whether it could be a threat to the project delivery and how other activities would need to be rearranged. An update of the plan needs to be produced quickly for everybody on the project to have an updated reference of what is going to happen.

This requires that the project management team has spare resources available to tackle this work; or, said differently, that it has managed to keep the work of normal administrative tasks at a controlled level that allows discretionary time to tackle those changes effectively.

It is where projects will fail that:

- Have excessively complicated and developed schedules and cost models,
- Did not organize themselves in terms of processes, resources and systems to minimize the time spent on normal administrative tasks,
- Require the mobilization of external resources to manage changes.

They will not be agile enough to integrate change quickly, understand its effects down the line, and respond accordingly in a timely manner. Instead those projects will just be in reactive mode to events that happen – they will have a direct reflex reaction without the proper thinking and strategizing. Unfortunately, that is what is being observed too often!

The importance of identifying and upholding the project purpose

As we have already argued in White Paper 2012-13 *Define Clearly Your Project Objectives – Why is this Project Step so Often Skipped*, defining project objectives are key to project success. We need to go further here and speak of project purpose – an inspiring purpose that mobilizes the project team. The project purpose needs to be clearly defined, clarified and communicated. All the actions taken to reach this purpose should subordinate to it.

The path that will be followed to achieve the purpose should not be as important as reaching it. Thus, while the project plan might change depending on the circumstances, the project purpose remains.

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Thus, instead of trying to maintain fixed as much as possible the plan, we need to take the view that what should remain really intangible is the project purpose, while the plan should be allowed to be modified by events.

Stop moaning and enjoy the thrill of project management!

Project management for large and complex projects is not like manufacturing. It is not predictable. It is not about Six Sigma or maintaining variances as minimum as possible compared to the plan. It is about acknowledging that change is part and parcel of project management, and designing processes and systems around it. It is about identifying what is the real purpose of the project, and subordinating the plan to reach it to the purpose. Change is not an exception in project management. It is part of normal life. Let us change our viewpoint on that and design project delivery processes that are agile and built around change management.

Stop moaning about changes to the plan! All experienced project practitioners know that it is the thrill of finding solutions to the most unexpected and intricate situations that make the thrill of the profession – and why they have chosen it. Change is part and parcel of the fun of project leadership. Let us recognize it as such, as the daily challenge of any project practitioner, and build our processes around it.

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