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Improving Communication and Synergy between Disciplines: the Way to Project Delivery Excellence

In several of our consulting assignments we have found that project organizations were too focused on discipline and specialty excellence and did not put enough emphasis on the inter-discipline communication for project delivery – albeit obviously the most effective improvement would have been found there. This White Paper explores the topic from the perspective of where the emphasis needs to be in terms of organizational development.

Disciplines and projects

A lot of project delivery organizations are organized around strong disciplines and departments: engineering, procurement, construction, commissioning being the main ones; and those are then further divided along with the particular specialties of the field. It is of course important to maintain an appropriate depth of knowledge in each discipline.

When it comes to project execution for large projects, these disciplines need to contribute generally in a sequential manner to project delivery. The net effect is generally comparable to a domino effect. Because project execution is never smooth in particular for Large, Complex projects, schedule pressure, unexpected changes, mistakes, hiccups, non delivery of certain contributors and all sorts of events prevent a neat execution where each discipline would have finished its contribution before the next one would kick in. The last disciplines in the chain in particular, feel like they get to sort out the mess in the form of disorderly bits and pieces arriving from the chain predecessors.

Faced with this situation, organizations often tend to focus on improving each discipline with the hope of getting each discipline to deliver more reliably.

It does not work, or at best produces only marginal improvements. In particular for complex projects, the key is not in improving each step of the process. It is in improving the communication between all the steps.

How to identify that there is a communication issue

It is generally quite easy to identify that there is a communication issue impeding the effectiveness of project delivery. Symptoms include:

- End-of-chain disciplines complaining about poor communication of updates and changes,
- Early-chain disciplines complaining about changes done by later-chain disciplines without notice,
- Project manager complaining that it is an uncoordinated mess.

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Basics of improving communication between the disciplines: the integrated project team

The first basic step is an integrated project management teams and strong matrix organizations – they are absolutely mandatory for the success of complex projects. Although they are well known best practices it is amazing how organizations still resist to the effective application of such practices in the name of conformance and efficiency at discipline level.

> **If your project-oriented organization is executing complex projects and is plagued by a lack of communication, invest in communication first. For the same effort and cost the result will be incomparably more effective, bringing your organization to the next level in terms of project success.**

What they don't realize is that even if each discipline is super-<u>efficient</u>, but they don't communicate, the overall <u>effectiveness</u> will be very limited! This is because in complex projects unforeseen events always happen, which make retroaction, rework and iterations an unavoidable part of project life.

By integrated team we mean that all the project team members are brought together in a geographically separate office space that is reserved to the project, and is not mixed with any of the discipline's office space. As such, communication on a day-to-day basis will be much more frequent at the project level than at the discipline level.

Advanced improvements in communication between disciplines: shared status update systems that are used for decision-making

In addition to the integrated project team and the powerful creation of an emotional bond between project team members, the project-based organization can develop advanced communication capabilities between the project team members by using common status

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tools and databases that are filled-in a shared manner by all disciplines. What is important is to make sure they all contribute to a shared project status that will be used for project decision making; and that project decision making equally considers the input of all disciplines. The

implementation of such a system is particularly delicate when construction happens in a different site than the project office, as is usually the case; but it is absolutely essential to the effectiveness of project execution.

The link with Total Quality

Total Quality initiatives are all about creating communication linkages between disciplines by getting groups of people working together that represent the different disciplines, at the working level, working on sorting out basically communication problems.

Total Quality-type workshops involving all relevant disciplines around common project delivery problems is thus a direct solution for improving the communication between disciplines. This can be done in a durable manner by getting these teams to work on improving the overall project delivery process – focusing on the interfaces between disciplines.

So, in your organization, where should you invest first?

Investing to improve single disciplines is easy. Specialists will know what to do to improve the efficiency of their discipline. Improving all disciplines to the point where they follow the world-class processes of their discipline will be expensive as there are many disciplines involved – but it can be done.

Investing to improve communication between disciplines during project execution is hard. It takes creativity to find the right way, and it requires customized tools and changes to the arrangement of office space and behaviors.

What should you invest in? If your project-oriented organization is executing complex projects and is plagued by a lack of communication, invest in communication first. For the same effort and cost the result will be incomparably more effective, bringing your organization to the next level in terms of project success.

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