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Actual Project Leadership is About Organizing Effective Conversations — not to Run Properly Complicated Tools

Conventional project management invokes a series of processes and tools that are often run by specialists with great expense of resources, like for example scheduling, cost control, project risk, scope management, etc. Most conventional project practitioners make sure that those processes are followed with application. What they don't realize is that these tools are only there for one reason: allow the project leader to have effective conversations with its team, and in general, catalyze effective conversations. The value of these tools actually lies more in these conversations than in the actual formal result of the tool. This perspective changes everything in how these tools should be run.

The unavoidable increase in complication of specialist tools in project organizations

Organizations that run large, complex projects have often developed comprehensive tools and processes to cover all the usual project management areas. Specialists and functional departments ensure that these tools are constantly developed and updated; and that the right support is provided to the projects to run them properly.

In the long term, this often results in processes and tools that become more complicated and comprehensive over time. It is a natural effect of having specialists that need to justify their existence by making those tools more time intensive and mandatory. Schedules become increasingly complicated and bloated; risk management tools are developed further every time a mishap happens somewhere in the organization; cost control becomes more detailed and rigid, etc.

Project leadership reloaded: what are all these tools really for?

Project success in large, complex projects is about project leadership. It is about mobilizing the project team to take the right decisions in the uncertain context that accompanies project execution. In this context, the project leader cannot just be like an orchestra director ensuring the coordination between a number of specialists according to a predefined partition. The role of the project director is to ensure that effective conversations are held at the project team level, and the right changes to the project direction are made in time, earlier than later.

This puts back into perspective the tools used by the project organization:

- How are these tools effectively contributing to decision-making?
- How are these tools contributing to having effective conversations at the project team level?

As a side-note, while some of these tools are used also for reporting outside the project on a number of issues, we are firm believers that they should be primarily used for the benefit of the project and only after, used by the rest of the organization. As the project spends large amounts of resources running these tools they should be the first beneficiaries. External parties including management should make sure that reporting requirements do not place any additional significant burden on the project. For example, project reporting should be first and foremost a tool for the project leader (a way to reflect on the condition of the project) and structured as such, and not primarily a tool for management reporting. Or at least they should be structured so as to enable meaningful conversations with management or other stakeholders!

The impact of changing the perspective to supporting effective conversations

Taking now the perspective that these project management tools' first objective should be to support effective conversations that lead to decision-making, what are the objectives of these tools? They can be summarized as follows:

- Reflect a reliable vision of the situation that effectively reflects properly current reality;
- Allow a sound forecast over the next few months of the trends at work;
- Allow to prioritize and drill down to the current drivers of the project execution.
- Have a presentation that can be understood by all and be used to foster an effective project team conversation and get project team members to highlight issues.

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For example in this context, accuracy needs only to be 'good enough' as long as the tools properly reflect current reality. That last property is more important than having a very precise snapshot of all the details. Complication should then be 'just enough' to make sure the main project drivers are grasped and avoid expending resources beyond this point.

All in all, it is more important to have a tool that readily highlights issues with a high communication value than a very complicated tool that can only be used and understood by specialists. Let go of long lists/ registers of items over many pages that don't reflect any kind of relative importance of the items listed! Let go of obscure

software that produce results which origin cannot be understood. The tools used should primarily produce communication products that can highlight important trends and thus foster the necessary discussions.

A lot of project management tools as they are used in most projects do not allow to have readily the right conversations:

- Schedule is often a long winded affair with hundreds of critical activities; its conventional static usage does not allow to readily monitor trends, which are often the most important information;
- Cost control reports do not expand enough on large forecast variances and the exploration of their root causes;
- Risk management tools are not prioritized sufficiently and dynamic changes in risk exposure not highlighted; quantitative risk management tools become convoluted tools which meaning is difficult to grasp by the project team.

How the usage of project management tools need to change

Notwithstanding the inner workings of the project management tools (as long as their implementation is just complicated enough to give reliable answers to the 'where are we' and 'where are we going' questions), usage of the tools need to change on two dimensions:

- More emphasis needs to be given by the project team to the update of the tools to reflect accurately reality. Updates should not be just the problem of the specialist but of the entire team. It is not acceptable to have situations where in a meeting, a project team member would state that the schedule or the cost is completely inaccurate.
- More emphasis needs to be given in the way the results of the tool are communicated.

In particular, the following changes are recommended in the way reports are issued: make sure it all fits on a one-page report (even if the page is large)!

- On schedule, a lens needs to be used focused on the most important elements that drive the success of the project (for example, a one-page graphical convergence monitoring tool is a great interface), as well as monitoring their dynamics over time.
- On cost, the most important variances need to be highlighted on a one-page report
- On risk, the main risks and those that have evolved the most significantly need also to be highlighted on a graphical one-page report.

Holding effective project leadership meetings

Project meetings are often a scourge of conventional project management. Project leaders need to know how to transform these meeting in encounters where effective, meaningful conversations are held. Having appropriate, understandable outputs from project management tools will help concentrate the attention of the team.

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In addition, the project leader needs to use a number of facilitating tools to ensure that the meetings are as effective as possible and deliver prioritized, achievable action points focused on what is really important for the project success. Having built an effective, performing team as part of the initial project investment will also be a great help in achieving these goals.

You can't afford not to have these meaningful conversations

We observe through our consulting assignments that often, the ability to have these effective conversations is the differentiator that makes the difference between project success, and project mediocrity or even outright failure.

Having more of these tough conversations, more often, needs to be a constant objective of the project leader. It needs to be supported by appropriate outputs from all the tools that are run at great expense of resources. Understanding that the ultimate goal of all these tools is effective communication of major issues is key in implementing them in the right way. Never keep this objective out of your mind!