

Building a project management capability

Improving project delivery is an aim for many companies. Allen Ruddock, director of Transformis Consulting, shares his experiences of some past attempts and outlines his company's holistic approach to the problem.

For many years there have been high profile project failures. These failures are only the tip of the iceberg. Depending on which survey you choose, between 50% and 85% of projects fail in some way. With robust methodologies like Prince2 around and certified/qualified project managers more common, why are we still experiencing these failures?

Over the years I have worked with a number of companies that have tried to address their project delivery shortcomings. Three approaches are described below:

The training approach

This organisation decided to upskill its project managers. It built a 12 day intensive project management course accredited to the ISEB's certificate in project management. Sponsored by the MD of operations, the course won a national professional training award and trained business, systems development and IT operations staff in all aspects of project management.

The course did 'raise the bar' on project management in the organisation. But it was driven and focussed on IT projects. Core business change projects were out of scope. Also, middle management was resistant to the messages coming back from the project managers attending the course. Enthusiasm waned following a takeover and departure of the key sponsors.

The assurance approach

This approach involved creating an independent assurance function tasked with reviewing and assisting the top 20 change projects. The department was created to be the centre of excellence and support for these projects,



offering advice, mentoring and best practice across the organisation.

Whilst value was brought to the projects supported, there were some issues. Firstly, as part of IT the function was not readily accepted by the business. As a central cost, it had to justify recharges for its services. Finally, review recommendations were often beyond the capability of the incumbent project managers. Once again senior management changes lead to loss of sponsorship.

The support approach

Here a small cadre of senior project/programme managers were assembled to support the company's major change projects with advice, mentoring, training, tools and techniques. Initially successful, the group started to establish change programme functions in each business division. A change of senior management resulted in the group being disbanded with only one programme function having been established.

- There are some recurring themes here;
- Changes in sponsorship lead to failure
 - IT ownership causes problems with business acceptance
 - The focus was on the project managers

At Transformis we believe it's not just the project manager who is responsible for the end results of change. They are responsible for the delivery of the solution, but the business must be ready to accept that solution. Furthermore, the business is responsible for delivery of the expected benefits. These three core pillars are pulled together under the project board that oversees the project within the overall stakeholder environment.

Project management is therefore a competence required by many and not the project managers alone. Also, given the uncertainty, or risk, associated with projects this needs to be underpinned with an effective project risk management approach and appropriate independent assurance.

This holistic approach to building an effective project management capability requires sponsorship and support at all levels of the organisation. Appropriate people management policies and processes are needed to suitably reward and develop the careers of those involved in projects. Put these building blocks in place and your organisation will be ready for the step change in performance that comes from being a 'project organisation'.

Transformis Consulting specialise in helping organisations develop their project management capability through training, mentoring and consulting services.

For more information contact
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