

“Managing Projects in an Unstructured Environment”

AIPM Evening Seminar
– 30th May 2006

 Misha Jovanovic
IntensIT Consulting Pty Ltd

Overview

- Introduction
- Identifying Unstructured Environments
- Challenges
- Ideas for managing projects in Unstructured Environments

Research Background

- 12 years of recording projects as a practitioner. Wrote everything down as it happened
- Observed other project managers at different stages of their career
- Reviewed many projects and organisations
- Coached developing project managers
- This material is focused on developing project managers

Introduction

- Many organisations do not have structures and disciplines in place to support effective completion of projects
- Can occur to some extent even in large successful organisations
- Probably more normal than structured environments that support smooth project management
- Note – This presentation is based on IT projects, but replace “IT” with your own discipline & you will see it matches very closely

Identifying Unstructured Environments

- An unstructured environment has lots of people running around, but not enough planning to get on top of underlying issues
- Different organisations may have different symptoms
- There are many potential symptoms ...

Identification – Project History

- Organisation has limited experience managing projects
- Projects run without agreeing scope, budget or timings
- Projects started, but never completed or not all scope done. Several attempts made to complete specific projects
- High proportion of projects fail to deliver on time, budget or scope
- Project performance and risks not monitored by IT management at a high-level
- Lots of projects implement pilot systems then stop, leaving temporary solutions in place long term
- IT systems not built to be easily supported. Poor handover from projects to support teams

Identification - Priorities

- Priorities poorly defined or not followed
- Large backlog of requests & increasing
- Managers too busy to solve problems
- Internal (or external) customers keep changing requirements
- Customers and management have difficulty defining project scopes
- Staff can't say no (try to fix every problem) or always say no (too busy)
- No processes or too many processes, so nothing gets done
- No one is able to make any decisions (either big or small)
- He who shouts loudest gets looked after first
- Lots of surprises, as unexpected problems emerge

Identification – Planning Rigour & Staff Behaviours

- Lack of effective planning by management, more doing
- Lots of “fire fighting”. People running around fixing perceived highest priority
- Roles and responsibilities not clearly defined for staff
- Staff disorganised. They don't follow a logical & complete approach to completing work (e.g. build before design, test before defining test results, etc)
- Inexperienced staff try to solve problems, but without guidance, sometimes get caught in a loop which they can't get out of. Work gets left and they get frustrated
- No clear business or IT strategies
- The organisation is in a state of change, but no one is effectively managing this change
- Little or no documentation

Identification - Relationships

- Teams in different parts of the organisation not used to talking to each other or working together
- The IT department lacks credibility with other areas

Challenges to running projects in Unstructured Environments

- All sorts of ways you can lose control of your project
- Many of them somewhat illogical, so difficult to identify and anticipate
- Odd behaviours recorded over 12 years
- There will be further issues that are not listed here

Challenges – Organisational

- Lack of authority given to project manager
- Limited awareness of project management & its benefits - You will need to sell your project and how it will be run
- Resources – Very limited availability of suitable resources, especially technical analysis. Don't get forced to use untrained staff without skilled backup
- You can't assume anything – Anything can go wrong, as different controls and habits are developed in different organisations as the norm
- No rigour - Nothing will be done with any rigour unless you specify it. Many organisations don't have tightly managed IT processes and lack awareness of IT rigour
- Requirements & scope change – People don't understand why they can't change their minds. So, expect regular scope changes

Challenges – Work Practices

- Beware of staff with unstructured work practices
- You will know when this is happening because tasks are not completed and staff say they are almost there, but ...
- Watch for:
 - Unstructured organisations have lots of these staff
 - These staff are usually keen to help, but don't want to admit they are having problems
 - Classic symptom to look for is “nearly there” but never actually finishing OR even worse pretending to finish, but getting caught later
 - Lots of rework becomes evident in later project phases
 - Very difficult to manage – first consider teaming this staff member with a more experienced person. If this doesn't work, you may be forced to replace them. Carry out quality reviews
 - One of the earliest points that you can check this is during design. Are they doing some design or ignoring or rushing this step because they don't know how to design? Documentation?

Challenges – Staff Motivation

- Staff often not motivated
- Staff left to solve problems & used to failure
- Not recognised for effort & no clearly defined goals
- Dysfunctional environment symptoms, as staff not respected or given time to work properly
- Often not their fault & due to no framework or guidance
- You may see following behaviours which you must address:
 - Staff deliberately avoiding taking responsibility (e.g. refusing to estimate their work)
 - Staff work in silos, so limited or no communication with others
 - Lack of respect for others - to avoid disappointment
 - Staff non-committal, so not disappointed when projects fail

Ideas for managing projects in Unstructured Environments

- Do not attempt to solve structural problems
- Manage your project relatively smoothly by creating mini structures within the organisation which your project can work within
- Don't waste effort solving every problem with the organisation on your first project. Don't try to fix the organisation. You have a project to run
- (Un) Structural issues run deep and have a lot of history. It will take time to guide the organisation to improve their project capability
- Once you run a project successfully, you are in a better position to convince management of merits of running structured projects

Ideas – Project Manager

- Make time to plan & manage (remove other commitments)
- Project Manager accountable for every task
- Don't assume anything. Anticipate every problem
- Believe in yourself & that structured approach is correct
- Manage scope very tightly & keep project simple
- Get sponsor who is committed & understands role
- Understand & accept structures to support project management rarely in place. Expect frustration, as new ways of not following the process arise. Allow extra time & contingency. Stay calm, be persistent
- Lead by example – by controlling your project, you can demonstrate value of project management
- Get comfortable that you rarely fit into organisation's structure. Develop techniques to manage – e.g. “borrowing” resources

Ideas – Project Plan

- Scope everything into project. Any dependencies will put your project under pressure & knock on effects
- Define all tasks in detail & intra project dependencies linked & visible
- If the business cannot define requirements clearly, structure project with initial prototyping before defining complex requirements
- Complete full project plan before any project tasks start
- Keep project plan up to date
- Get all stakeholders to agree project scope. If they can't agree, escalate. Get scope agreed or you don't have a project or someone will be unhappy
- All project resources agree time & effort for all tasks
- Allow higher than usual time and cost contingency

Ideas – Structure & Rigour

- Enforce rigour and good project practices
- Educate project stakeholders on why managing project formally
- Define & enforce structure around project lifecycle & disciplines. Many staff often don't understand value of structured approach & are used to working in silos
- Set up project support structures
 - Regular meetings with influential stakeholders to inform & ensure committed to decisions
 - Get Steering Committee members to be a cross-section to ensure no one has total control
 - Insurance policy to prove that decisions made, if disputed
- Sometimes easier to change environment than work around it
- Building goodwill & defining rules of play critical & will improve chances of success (e.g. scope changes)

Ideas – Resources

- Staff accountable to Project Manager for project tasks
- Select resources carefully & only accept if sufficiently skilled or budget for skilled backup. Balance internal & external staff
- IT line managers commit resources for time required
- Allow extra contingency in case staff diverted to higher priority support
- Key staff to bring in are business & technical analysts. Good requirements, design & testing key
- Put less experienced staff into their silos to get results
- Keep staff holiday plans up to date & staff confirm leave with Project Manager before approval
- Allow extra time for managing business resources with no project experience
- Adjust project plan to remove tasks with inexperienced staff from critical path

Ideas – Tracking

- **Micro manage** every task for less experienced staff and staff who have a history of getting caught in a loop
- If unsure, micro-manage until they gain your trust, but do subtly or you will annoy them
- Produce a status report every week. This ensures tracking never out of date

Ideas – Project Processes

- Enforce tight project practices in team
- Define all deliverables & review with staff their approach
- Include quality reviews in project processes
- Project deliverables should include (it won't get done later):
 - Project plan
 - Business Requirements
 - Technical Design
 - Test Plans & results
 - Implementation Plan
 - Support and Technical documentation
- System Testing & UAT to cover correctness and completeness
- Minimise use of email for follow up
- Document all agreements & decisions made & send out to team

Ideas – Summary

- The key to successful projects is people. Get good people and manage them well and you will get the best result
- Run a “stand alone” project to overcome constraints of unstructured organisations. Don’t worry about fixing the organisation this time
- If you are unsuccessful in convincing management to follow a structured project approach
 - get right resources allocated to your project & under your control
 - apply project management rigour to processes
 - micro-manage every task as if your life depended on it
 - i.e. be structured anyway
- If you are not able to do this, then consider refusing to manage the project, because it is likely to fail

Any Questions?

