



Project management - Issues and solutions

ABB Engineering Services has been helping companies deliver projects for over 10 years. Experience tells us they are not easy and in fact research shows us that 85% of projects fail to meet expectations. In some industries this figure is even worse. A number of principles have emerged that contribute to project success. We would never guarantee a magic solution, there is too much uncertainty and complexity to do that, but improving a project's success is within reach of everyone.

We facilitate and coach the project management and team

We have worked with over 50 projects with a total value of around £1 billion across 20 countries. Our role in all these situations is to support the project manager and his team to deliver the project through facilitating team sessions and coaching the project manager in his leadership of the team.

Identify and categorise projects and then select the appropriate tools

Is a construction project the same as a technology project, is a I.S. implementation project the same as a platform development project? The one size fits all project management approach is not helpful particularly at the early stages of a project. Enabling the project manager to unravel the peculiarities and nature of the project and then select the most appropriate tools is vital. A large complex systems project was not making sufficient progress, once the project team realised they were using "painting by numbers" tools to manage a "walking in the fog" project they were able to speed up the delivery of the project.

Establish the project through collective planning

The danger of the dedicated project planner is that they create good quality plans that no-one understands or are committed to. Recognising the people dimension is crucial for the delivery stage of the project. Consensus planning enables clarity and alignment around purpose, objectives, deliverables and goals which forms the project "contract" with the project team. This surfaces risks and assumptions, the challenging questions get asked and many problems waiting to emerge are highlighted early on.

Manage stakeholders

Projects by their nature cut across organisational and company boundaries. Managing all these interested parties is an important role for the project manager. As part of the collective planning stage bringing all interested parties into this is vital. The result of doing this in a series of technology development projects meant that some projects got cancelled as no customers wanted the output, other projects won increased funding as the different part of the business saw the benefits to them.

Manage through goals

Several times we have been asked to support a project that was struggling to manage all the interdependencies within the project. These projects often have a large detailed network with thousands of activities that the project manager and planner had become lost in trying to manage the detail. We encouraged them to think at the strategic level of the project and identify with the project team the 20 or so key goals of the project over time. Against each goal agree responsibilities and the cross functional team to deliver and then leave the detail to them, so they can contract with the other goal owners on what is required between them.

Successful projects reflect the environment within which they operate - the most powerful lever for change is the culture that is created around projects

We have often been asked to support projects when they have already run into many difficulties. Unfortunately at this stage the leverage to bring success to the project is getting lower. What we find are project managers who are carrying the weight of the company's problems as he tries to solve the problems limiting his project which are a symptom of the wider company's inabilities. In one company we worked with there was a strong power-role culture causing a rule by fear, political infighting, inflexible job descriptions with little autonomy with fights over turf. We worked with the company to create an achievement-support culture. This is where people focus on what is to be achieved over who's job it is and how can people support each other rather than furthering own goals at expense of others.

Commitment and leadership

It was a memorable team planning workshop where in a technology project the "brick wall" was hit as the technical difficulty could not be met in the timescales. It was the leadership of the project manager that lifted the commitment of the project team to see the strategic imperative and think creatively about how the timescales and solution could be met. We have a series of tools to identify leadership style and then focus on the things that need to be done differently to match your leadership style to the type of project.

Partnership and co-operation

Without the openness between the customer and the project team around their common objectives and problems then much effort is wasted protecting the different companies positions and opportunities for better solutions are lost. Creating co-operation is not easy and requires both clearly agreed common goals and a change in attitude in delivering them.

Conclusion

Given the above issues what is the next step for your project and your company. Our first stage is diagnosis, being clear about the current issues and working with the management of the company to establish a vision of where they want to be. From this an action plan can be developed to move the company and project there.

Real world experience at your fingertips!

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- Improving business and supply chain performance
- Improving regulatory performance and compliance
- Improving variable cost performance
- Increasing operational competitiveness
- Optimising asset base

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