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In This Issue

ACHIEVE PROJECT SUCCESS WITH SPONSORSHIP AND CLEAR VISION

By Elizabeth Larson, PMP, CBAP and Richard Larson, PMP, CBAP, Principals, Watermark Learning, Inc.

According to the Gartner Institute, 50 percent of all projects are delivered late and/or over budget. We all know how difficult it is to achieve project success. Many things can hinder this success, such as little or no executive sponsorship, lack of project management support, unclear vision, no project plan or weak processes for handling change.

This article offers success factors to address common problems encountered when managing projects.

Success Factor 1 - Acquire Project Sponsorship

According to a Gartner Group study, lack of executive sponsorship is often a major contributor to project failures. One way to assure executive support is to clearly define roles before the project begins. When roles are not assigned, project managers often feel responsible for the project's vision and scope, and can end up making decisions they shouldn't. Sponsors, on the other hand, should initiate projects and create charters, helping to ensure their involvement during project planning and execution.

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Upcoming Events

PMI AGC 12th International Seminars, Conference and Exhibition
January 27-29, 2009

PMI Global Congress Asia Pacific
February 9-11, 2009

PMI SeminarsWorld®
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
February 12-13, 2009

"The project vision is critical to its success. Without project vision, managing inevitable changes"

Letter from the Chair

By Brian Piper, PMP - NPD SIG Chair

As this is my last opportunity to address you before the new 2009 Board is elected, I would like to thank the 2008 Board for their volunteered time to address the needs of the New Product Development SIG membership.

I would also like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to serve as your Chair. I look forward to working on the 2009 Board as Immediate Past Chair.

I encourage your direct feedback to the new Board on any concerns you have, how we can better serve our New Product Development community or how you would like to get more out of our group.

Let's maximize the full potential of our community!!

Finally, during this holiday season, we have much to be thankful for even though some may be victims of a slouching global economy. Look for those seemingly small nuggets of opportunity to share an act of kindness to someone less fortunate.

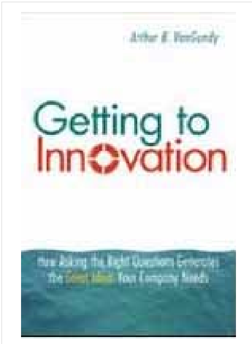
NPD SIG Now a LinkedIn Group!

Following in the footsteps of other SIGs, such as the Consulting SIG, the New Product Development SIG created a LinkedIn Group officially on December 8, 2008. To be part a member of group, all you need do is go to LinkedIn, search on Groups and type in PMI New Product Development. This is a new member benefit we are providing to increase networking and sharing of best practices. You do need to be a current member of PMI in good standing to be accepted.

Please freely post discussions or suggest topics to the Group Manager, which is myself, Kim Johnson, your outgoing VP of Membership. This is a way where I can continue to be involved with the NPD community while not holding two different Board positions. For those of you whom are not aware, I am in the incoming Chair of the Consulting SIG for 2009 and our main focus for the first part of the year will be to migrate to the new Community of Practice (COP) model.

Please feel free to share any comments, questions, concerns you have about the Group or other topics to the following email address: kajconsultinginc@gmail.com

BOOK REVIEW



Getting to Innovation: *How Asking the Right Questions Generates the Great Ideas Your Company Needs*

Arthur B. VanGundy
New York: AMACOM, 2007
270 + xvii pages US$29.95

By Greg Githens, PMP,
Catalyst Management Consulting, LLC

People characteristically invest more energy in describing solutions and less in defining the underlying problem, need, or opportunity. Part of this phenomenon is people's reliance on *ad hoc* brainstorming. Many innovation initiatives typically start with the boss saying something like, "we need to grow with new products." Soon, there is a meeting where participants respond with their ideas of "here's how we can do it." During the meeting, someone will observe that there is not consensus on the problem definition statement, but the preference for solution generation creates inertia, and the group often fails to accomplish the innovation objectives.

Arthur VanGundy's *Getting to Innovation* describes a disciplined problem-solving approach that emphasizes, "framing organizational innovation challenges at the outset of a project" (page xii). The concept of a mental "frame" is fundamental in the literature on thinking skills, and means the paradigm or boundary of the matter under consideration. Frames are often poorly stated, and reframing is valuable. VanGundy emphasizes framing innovation in the context of strategic intent and strategy through a systematic approach to posing questions.

One re-framing technique is to ask the "why" question in response to the initial request. For example, if the boss says "we need to develop a new product line," the team would start by exploring the rationale, asking, "Why do we need to develop a new product line?" Answering that question might reveal whether the opportunity lies in exploiting technology, responding to a customer's request, or matching a competitive entry. VanGundy suggests asking many stakeholders many questions and provides examples of over 100 questions to stimulate thinking. While questions like "Who are our customers? What markets are we in?" seem mundane; my experience is that people often are unable gives answers that are aligned with their bosses and with their peers. People tend to assume that the answers to the basic questions are known, and it is a waste of time to explore basic framing questions. The framing problem, of course, is that many times people's minds have not grasped the initial question. VanGundy points out correctly that there never will be worthwhile answers without the proper questions (p. 17). After a broad survey of the universe of available questions, Van Gundy advises to narrow the questions down to a "challenge bank" composed of a few vital, profound questions that will serve as the focal point for innovation. There is a simple suggestion for making the challenge question useful: place the phrase "How might we..." in front of the need; e.g., How might we define our markets and market share?, How might we increase our customer loyalty? The point is to identify and work on those challenges that are most likely to be productive in advancing the organization's strategy.

Overall, *Getting to Innovation* is readable and a practical refresher on problem definition. It would be particularly useful to a number of small-to-medium sized companies that periodically schedule brainstorming retreats for identifying solutions for improving their business.

SET for Success: Leading with Simplicity, Engagement and Trust

By Jerry Manas, PMP, the Marengo Group

I call it the tale of two paradigms. On one hand, there are the process control pundits that say, "Process is everything." "If only we had the right process," they say, "then it wouldn't matter what kind of people we had." Or, "If only everyone followed our process, then things would be better."

Then there are those at the opposite end of the spectrum. "Process schmocess," they say. "All we need to do is give people the right objectives, and get out of their way. They'll know what to do."

There are dangers lurking in both extremes of thinking. First, let's say everyone *did* follow a rigorous process (which is unlikely to begin with, given the variability of human nature). What then? What if reality gets in the way and renders the process irrelevant—or worse… incorrect? What if people followed the process to the letter and some of your best people became apathetic because they felt that their creativity was stifled?

Let's look at the other extreme, where people are left to their own devices to meet a defined objective. If we don't provide the right systems, tools, and training, or we assume they're on board with our ideals just because we announced them; we are setting our people up for failure (this problem is frequently seen with the traditional *Management by Objectives* approach). There is a fine line between freedom and neglect.

These are all very real dangers, and unfortunately they happen every day. The way to reconcile these schools of thought is through three cornerstones of good leadership: *Simplicity*, *Engagement* and *Trust (which we can remember with the acronym SET)*.

The Simple Life

Management's instinct when trying to improve the way things are done is to work every detail out on paper, and then get people to conform. While it's useful to analyze processes and figure out what's working and what's not, to prescribe every detail is an exercise in futility. Instead, we need a handful of guiding principles, clear and simple objectives, and a high level framework to foster the correct mindset. How people accomplish things should not be prescribed, except for cases where safety is involved or exact specifications must be met. For any form or report, we must ask, "Is this needed? Why? Who will read it and use it? How will they use it? Is there an easier way to accomplish the same thing? Would a checklist be more appropriate than a form?" In many cases, we can simplify our lives and eliminate extra steps. In addition, many of these tools can be moved to a "toolbox," which people can use as needed, depending on the situation.

If we spent more time *helping* people by making sure they had the right systems, tools, and training, and less time *measuring* them and *monitoring* them, we'd achieve results quicker. And isn't results what we're after? As the saying goes, "Nobody ever grew taller by being measured."

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What about the need for standardization? Even Peter Scholtes, renowned guru of quality, systems, and process, cautions us on the overuse of standardization. Scholtes writes and consults frequently on the importance of quality standards. Yet, he offers:

> *There is a delicate line to walk when dealing with standardization. On the one hand, we want methods of work that are usefully constraining, that eliminate needless variation in method, and, therefore, in output… While we want to eliminate art-form-like caprice and needless variation from work, we do not want to make work oppressively rigid and obnoxiously bureaucratic. Between these is the fine line. By involving people in the standardization of work, we can remove some of the oppressiveness of it. People are less likely to balk at standards they have devised. Recognizing that we need not standardize everything should help. Also, agreeing to begin with those processes that we all acknowledge need standardization should help. The ideal is for people to take charge of their own standardization effort.*

In other words, not everything need be standardized. If we get everyone to agree on the few items that need standardization the most, we can begin there, and adjust accordingly. After all, this is an art, not a science. The key thing is to engage people in the process rather than announce “the new rules.” This takes us to our second cornerstone: engagement.

The Art of Engagement

Shared ideals is a key element of organizational success. And the road to shared ideals is paved with engagement. By engaging people in solving problems and/or addressing opportunities, we are tapping into their primordial need to help.

I once had a client who could not get his people to execute his business case form correctly. “They just don’t understand,” he said. “I’ve been doing this my whole career and have expertise in this area. They seem to resent that I’m asking them to provide this information.”

I advised, just as I often advise to clients, that he instead engage them in the process. I asked him to list the key objectives the document is mean to achieve, and for which audiences. The next step, I suggested, would be to schedule a session with his people where the group could collectively create a document (possibly referencing the current form) and agree on which items were needed, why they were needed, and what the simplest ways were to accomplish the objectives. “But they’re not as qualified,” he responded. I clarified that qualification is irrelevant. If people are expected to contribute at a high level, they will live up to those expectations. People will live up—or down—to the image we bestow upon them.

I asked him to make a point to listen to what they were saying, not to bully them into conformity. If they disagreed with the need for something, I asked him to pose probing questions, such as, “How would you suggest we avoid “xyz” or accomplish “abc?” In the end, they agreed on document everyone could live with. More importantly, his people said it was the first time they felt listened to and engaged in the process. Through engagement, the *relationships* improved, which is another vital element of success.

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A Matter of Trust

When we speak of simplicity and engagement, many managers get concerned. "How can we trust that our people will do the right thing?" they ask. Yet, trust is essential if we are to ever be scalable and grow other effective leaders. And so, is it our third cornerstone of good leadership. Trust, tempered with situational coaching, can work wonders toward long-term organizational excellence.

If we communicate clear objectives and outcomes, provide the right support, and build shared ideals through engagement, there is no reason we shouldn't be able to trust our people. Will there be abusers? Maybe. But a few bad apples shouldn't make us treat the whole bunch as spoiled.

Best Buy has achieved amazing increases in productivity and employee retention with their Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), a model built on trust. People can work wherever and however they choose, as long as they deliver results. And unlike *Management by Objectives*, people are not left to the wolves and then judged on elements that are out of their control. They are supported with means before they are judged on the ends. Ricardo Semler has achieved equally remarkable feats with his Semco organization (written about in his book, *Maverick*). His whole organizational model is built on trust, with flexible work schedules, no performance evaluations, an honor system for travel expenses, and so on. Yet, his profits have been steadily increasing for over 20 years.

Best Buy and Semco have embraced the concept of trust. According to a recent CIO Magazine article, so have McGraw-Hill, Cisco, and Deloitte, organizations which are also experimenting with flexible work schedules and achieving similar results.

What's surprising is that organizations are concerned about vigilance over their employees, and less so about vigilance over their leaders. If vigilance is needed, it is in ensuring our leaders create the right environment for success: an environment rooted in simplicity, engagement, and trust. Then we'll be SET for success!

About the Author

Jerry Manas is President of the Marengo Group, and author of Managing the Gray Areas (RMC Publications, January 2008) and Napoleon on Project Management (Nelson Business, April 2006). Through the Marengo Group, Jerry helps project teams achieve and sustain high-performance levels using techniques and practices that result in greater alignment, leaner processes, and more effective use of technology. His work has been cited by management guru Tom Peters and highlighted in a variety of publications, including Leadership Excellence, The National Post, The Globe and Mail, The Chicago Sun Times, and The Houston Chronicle. Jerry is a founding member of *The Creating We Institute* (www.creatingweinstitute.com) and co-founder of *PMThink!* (www.pmthink.com), a popular project management blog site. Visit his website at www.marengogroup.com.

10 Ways to Explain Things More Effectively

By Calvin Sun

In the course of your work, you may sometimes need to explain technical concepts to your customers. Having them understand you is important not only for technical reasons, but also to ensure customer satisfaction. The ability to explain things clearly and effectively can help you in your career, as well. Here are a few tips to help make your explanations understandable and useful.

#1: Keep in mind others' point of view

You've probably seen the famous illusion that looks like either a young woman or an old woman. Two people can look at that same picture, and they can have opposite views of what they're seeing. Keep this idea in mind when explaining a concept. Something that might be perfectly understandable to you might be incomprehensible to someone else. Don't be the person customers complain about as using "geek speak."

#2: Listen and respond to questions

It's easy to become annoyed when someone is asking questions. However, try to resist that reaction. A better attitude is to be happy that the other person is interested enough to ask questions. To minimize confusion and misunderstanding, try to paraphrase or summarize a question before you answer it. This step is particularly important if you're in a group setting, and you've just taken a question from someone in the audience. Repeating the question for the entire group helps everyone better understand your answer.

#3: Avoid talking over people's head

When you explain things to people, do their eyes glaze over? Chances are it's because you're talking over their head. Symptoms of such behavior include the use of jargon and acronyms. Remember, the people you're talking to probably lack your specialized knowledge, so you should use readily understandable terms.

The same goes for acronyms. They're important, but if you use them, define them in "longhand," followed by the acronyms in (parentheses), so that everyone's clear. Doing so avoids the scenario of situation normal, all fouled up (SNAFU).

Even within IT, the same acronym can mean different things. For example, both "active server page" and "application service provider" have the acronym ASP. A story from the Vietnam War era further illustrates this point. A young woman brought her boyfriend home to meet her father, a retired military officer. The woman was nervous because the boyfriend was a conscientious objector. When the father asked the young man to talk about himself, the latter replied, nervously, that he was a CO. The father clapped the young man on the back and congratulated him, thinking the latter was a commanding officer.

#4: Avoid talking down to people

Avoid the other extreme as well. Don't insult people by assuming that they're only as intelligent as a three-year-old. An attendee at one of my communications training classes described it aptly as "Barney communications."

Greek mythology has references to two monsters, Scylla and Charybdis, who sat on opposite sides of a narrow strait of water. If a ship sailed too close to Scylla, it was destroyed and the sailors eaten up. If the ship sailed too close to Charybdis, it was destroyed by a whirlpool that Charybdis created. The ship had to go right between them to survive. Follow that same principle with your customers: Make your explanations neither too complicated or too simple.

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#5: Ask questions to determine people's understanding

The people you're talking to shouldn't be the only ones asking questions. You should be asking questions as well, to make sure they understand. Your questions can be open ended, which gives people a chance to provide detailed information, or they can be closed ended, which generally calls for a simple yes/no response. In either case, asking questions tells people that you're interested that they understand.

#6: Focus on benefits, not features

What's the difference? A feature is some inherent property of an object. A benefit, on the other hand, is a way the feature helps a person. For example, one of the features of a Styrofoam cup, because of the material used, is insulation. Someone who's planning a party probably doesn't care how the cup provides insulation. That person is more interested in the fact that such a cup keeps hot things hot and cold things cold.

In the same way, try to focus on benefits of technology rather than features of technology. This distinction becomes more important the higher the level of the person you're talking to. The CFO probably has little need to know about the specific commands and steps involved in setting up database mirroring. That person will want to know, however, that such a practice reduces the chances of data loss.

#7: Use analogies to make concepts clearer

An analogy involves explaining an unfamiliar concept in terms of a familiar one. For example, in drawing an analogy between a firewall and a bank teller, you could say that people don't just go directly into a bank and take money out. They go to the teller and identify themselves; the teller makes sure they have enough money; and then the teller gives them the money. Similarly, a firewall ensures that people who want access to a system really are permitted to have that access.

When choosing an example for an analogy, first figure out the general principle you're trying to explain. Then, choose something from real life that illustrates that principle. Say, for example, that you're trying to explain memory leaks. Suppose you conclude that the principle involved is that of taking without giving back completely. An example/analogy might be the consequences of pouring a cup of pancake batter into successive measuring cups, or the consequences of lending money to your brother-in-law.

#8: Compare new concepts to familiar ones

Another illustrative technique is to use a familiar or existing product as a comparison. If you're explaining a new release of a software product, the comparison is easy. Simply discuss the additional capabilities it has over the previous one or how key features are different. If the person hearing your explanation is also an IT person and is familiar with different or older technology, try explaining in those terms if you can. For example, when explaining thin clients, consider a comparison to the old 3270-type terminals that IBM once used for connection to mainframes.

#9: Use the concepts of subsets and supersets

Brooklyn is a subset of New York City, because all of it is a part of that city. Conversely, New York City is a superset of Brooklyn, because the former contains, in addition to all of the latter, other boroughs as well. These concepts are helpful in describing, for example, a "lite" versus a "professional" version of a software product. If the latter does everything the former does, plus more, it truly is a superset of the former, and the former is a subset of the latter. Be careful, though: If the "lite" version does even one thing that's missing from the professional version, there's no longer a subset/superset relationship.

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10 Ways to Explain Things More Effectively CONTINUED

#10: Confirm that your explanation makes sense

Once you've finished explaining your point or answering a question, ask a final question yourself. Make sure the people who heard your explanation truly did understand it. Consider asking them to give you the explanation in their own words, just to double-check.

About the Author

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This article is reprinted courtesy of TechRepublic.com.

PMI Says Thank You to Members

With the end of the year approaching, we want to take a moment to sincerely thank you for being a PMI member. You have been an integral part of an exciting year. The results of the multi-year study, *Researching the Value of Project Management*, unveiled at the PMI Research Conference in Warsaw, Poland in July, provide solid proof that implementing project management brings measurable value to organizations.

We introduced two new project management credentials, the PMI Scheduling Professional (PMI-SP)℠ and the PMI Risk Management Professional (PMI-RMP)℠.

Four essential standards were updated, including *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*—Fourth Edition. We made improvements to PMI.org, such as a new home page. And, our project management career planning tool, PathPro℠, launched successfully for use by organizations and PMI members.

Our global congresses had a record attendance of nearly 8,000. In March, we opened an office in Mumbai, India.

None of these accomplishments would have been possible without you and all of our members.

View the complete article

Success Factor 2 – Support Project Management

Every organization conducts "projects," but the most successful ones follow a formal project management process. Here is a checklist evaluate whether an organization fully supports project management as a function:

- Does a sponsor write a formal charter to begin projects?
- Does a formal process exist for selecting projects prior to the project initiation?
- Is there a prescribed method for executing the phases of a project?
- Are there reusable templates for planning, estimating, tracking, reporting and closing projects?

Project managers can work with executives to encourage them to demonstrate support by offering rewards for successfully managed projects.

Success Factor 5 – Articulate and Link Business Needs to the Vision

When managing projects, if the core or underlying business problem is not clearly articulated, the right solution can be delivered for the wrong problem. Identifying the real need as part of project planning helps project managers ensure their project delivers value to customers. The way to get at the real business need is by asking questions such as:

- What is the current situation?
- What is causing business pain?
- What are the business consequences or lost opportunities if the project doesn't take place?

As the project gets underway, assure that all components of the project are tied directly to both the project and business vision, as articulated by the sponsor.

Success Factor 4 - Define A Clear Project Plan

A common project management pitfall is not taking the time to develop tasks and timelines at the beginning of a project. Usually this occurs when a sponsor or boss says, "Here's what we want--when can you get it done?" Or worse yet: "Here's what we want and it needs to be done in three months." Who has time to plan and document requirements under this type of pressure?

It is critical to identify and document project deliverables, tasks, ownership and time frames of the project prior to project initiation.

Success Factor 5 - Match Changes to Vision

The project vision is critical to its success. Without project vision, managing inevitable changes is difficult. Good project management requires stakeholders to agree and sign off on all project change requests. The stakeholders should be required to tie change requests to the overall project vision. If requests not linked to the vision are included in the project, the scope of the project has begun to creep.

Of course the sponsor, not the project manager, has final decision on changes. This brings us back to the vision: Vision gives impetus to doing projects in the first place. Vision drives the project plan. And, vision can help guide the project along on its way through changes that occur, without sidetracking or derailing the project.

In summary, projects are successful for many reasons. There are no "magic ingredients." But sponsorship, project management support, clear vision, a clear project plan and successfully handling change are five of the major factors attributing to project success.

About the Authors

Watermark Learning helps improve project success with outstanding project management and business analysis training and mentoring. We foster results through our unique blend of industry best practices, a practical approach, and an engaging delivery.

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Project Management Innovations is published as a membership benefit by, and for, the members of the PMI NPD SIG. The purpose of this publication is to facilitate networking and information exchange.

PMI Board of Directors Call for Nominations Now Open

As Institute volunteers, PMI encourages you to nominate individuals that you feel are ready to take on the challenge of serving on the PMI Board of Directors.

The Call for Nominations for positions on the PMI Board of Directors for a term of service from 2010-2012 can be viewed here.

The nomination period is open until 2 February 2009, however eligible members interested in submitting a name are encouraged to do so as early as possible. Refer to the Call for a complete list of action items and a timetable.