Ensuring Successful Project Delivery

This article is part of an Expert Opinion series examining how to ensure IT-based projects are delivered on time, within budget and according to specification

Follow the Leader

The foundation for a successful project is firm leadership

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Successful IT-based projects - those that are delivered on time, on budget, and on spec - share some essential common characteristics. Everyone involved in the project will have a clear idea of what must be achieved, the reasons why, what must be done, when by, and at what cost.

In short, they will understand a project's guiding principles or, to coin a phrase, the Vital Five: vision, motivation, action, timeline and budget. They will also willingly co-operate as a cohesive team that adheres to these guiding principles. And that success-inducing cohesion needs to be initiated, encouraged and sustained through leadership that spans the entire project.

In terms of project leadership, I was recently reminded of Willem de Liefde's concept of the 'Trinity of Leadership' explained in his book, "The Ego's Echo". The trinity consists of rainmaker, hunter and messenger. Each role carries responsibility for different functions that combine to produce an effectively led project.

In a nutshell, the rainmaker creates the vision of an improved organisation of the future and why the improvement matters. The hunter defines the actions that will be necessary to realise the vision and how to overcome the challenges of building the organisation of tomorrow. The messenger provides the ties that bind the team together across different silos, and ensures a harmonious harnessing to a common cause.

To be effective, each of the trinity must carry equal authority. Equality is essential in order to ensure consensus between their roles and their responsibilities. To provide leadership in a successful project, they must therefore operate in a horizontal structure rather than a vertical hierarchy.

Keeping it real

Putting people on Mars may be a laudable vision. It may be championed by the entire executive. However, requiring it to happen by close of business tomorrow turns the vision into a delusional fantasy. It's beyond the capabilities of any hunter and messenger.

The Mars example might be facetious, but it does illustrate the importance of consensus between rainmaker, hunter and messenger. It creates realism across a project's vision, motivation, action, timeline and budget.

Challenges to an effective trinity

In strategic projects, it's likely that several people will perform the roles of rainmaker, hunter and messenger. This can present a challenge of wills, as the roles seek to gain ascendancy over one another.

Through pedantry and inflexibility, the hunter can easily dilute the rainmaker's vision and motivation by identifying insuperable obstacles rather than proposing feasible solutions based on acceptable modifications to the vision.

And the same applies in reverse. A pedantic, inflexible rainmaker can refuse to modify the vision and therefore disrupt the guiding principles of action, timeline and budget – creating more work, longer timelines and expanding budgets. This may then have a knock-on effect by undermining the validity of the rainmaker's motivation as the world moves forwards. The need for an improved, mass-market saddle has expired. Someone just invented the car…

Equally, instead of motivating and promoting the need to change within the project team, a reactionary messenger can derail an effective rainmaker and hunter by too great an allegiance to the past. The messenger can advocate stasis to protect the operational status quo… knock the vision, action, timeline and budget out of shape so it can be shoehorned into legacy systems and processes.

Business analysts to the rescue

To avoid these all too common pitfalls – and the routine project failures they herald – the trinity has to protect the integrity of each guiding principle. As custodians of a project's vision, motivation, action, timeline and budget, the trinity must guard against one principle being fatally compromised in favour of another.

In particular, the leadership provided by rainmakers, hunters and messengers needs to prevent a fixation on the potentially restrictive but deeply entrenched mantra of project management: scope, time and cost.

Tasked with meeting definitive time and cost targets – which are easily set in stone and readily understood, project managers (PMs) frequently respond by making adjustments to something much more malleable – scope. If it is not sufficiently governed and informed by the project's vision and motivation, scope is typically not set in stone and not so readily understood.

Skilled and experienced BAs play a crucial role in understanding, articulating and sustaining the vision and motivation. They achieve this through a process of requirements engineering and assurance (RE&A) that clearly defines what must be done to realise the vision and how best to do it. They define scope in a manner that is understood by all stakeholders, and they ensure any changes are subject to the trinity's approval.

Without accurate RE&A that precisely reflects the vision and motivation, PMs cannot be provided with an accurate and detailed understanding of scope. They don't clearly recognise where they're going or the reasons why. They do, however, have great clarity on when to get there and how much they can spend.

This means it's easier for PMs to manipulate a vague and possibly ambiguous scope in the drive to satisfy the stark requirements of its more demanding and highly visible siblings, time and cost.

For BAs, reinforcing the trinity isn't just limited to supporting the rainmaker. How best to achieve a clearly articulated vision is a hunter function that's aided by BAs who facilitate two-way, consensus-generating communication between business requirements and their IT solutions.

Finally, BAs provide essential support for the messenger's role as they combine different operational activities in service of a single cause: to realise the vision on time and within budget.

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Glenda Wheeler is a founding director of Tharollo Consulting. Her profound understanding of the real factors that cause repetitive failures in IT-based projects is complemented by a proven approach to ensuring project success.

Established in 1997, Tharollo's expertise lies in managing R40m - R300m initiatives and is backed by a track-record of 100% success in delivering projects on time, within budget, and according to specification.

Tharollo is a North Sotho word meaning, 'solution for a problem.'

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