Leading Complex IT Projects: The Bottom Line — Part II

[By Rafael Pabon]

In Part I of this article, we introduced some ideas that will help you during the planning stage of your project. Now, in Part II, we focus on techniques for leading the project on an ongoing basis.

1. Manage projects of infinite complexity by focusing on what you cannot control; mitigate project risk by identifying and managing these resources

Complex projects require interaction and deliverables by many internal and external vendors and departments. You may have very little real leverage with some of these organizations, especially if you are a consultant. While tasks on the critical path matter, it matters more whether you have direct influence over the performance of the team or the individual providing each deliverable.

If you can withhold payment on a vendor that reports within your organizational chain, you control the resource. If you have spent time building personal relationships with other IT departments, you have more leverage, since you can "cash in some chips" and ask for a favor. But you can't influence the internal programmer analysts you do not know who report to a different profit center, and you could derail the plans if they do not deliver on schedule.

Don't focus on the 50 most important tasks on the critical path. If 42 tasks are assigned to people in your sphere of influence, focus on the eight tasks that must be done by entities where you have very little leverage. Of these, what are the two or three things that if they do not get done, will cause a "show stopper"?

Then, you can manage multiple projects by not getting bogged down in the details. You can track people in charge of those details, and only intervene if requested, or if you perceive the responsibilities are not being done. You might need to ask management to redirect or reassign tasks, or you may resort to an alternative approach.

A relatively simple task you cannot influence can delay a project, especially if there are few people with domain expertise in the organization to be able to successfully complete the work. For items outside your sphere of control, go down the chain of command to people who really know the details. For example, if you need to have 10 high-speed phone lines installed, the head of the IT telecom unit may say "no problem". However, if the technician who has to visit over the weekend to oversee the phone company tells you that in the past, 20% of the phone lines haven't worked, you can then plan for that risk. You might ask, "How long can we use a slow speed ISDN line as backup until they can correct any nonfunctioning high speed T1 backup lines that are in the original plan?" Do we need to consult the legal or compliance departments on this issue?

Spend 60% of your time focused on the items you can not control, 20% on responding to questions and issues, and only 20% on actively managing the project (meetings and memos).

2. Manage expectations up and down the management chain; communicate early with stakeholders at the first hint a key milestone may be missed

As the project rolls on, you will reap the benefits of having developed relationships before the project's official start date.

When unexpected complications or roadblocks arise — do not assume anything; go back to the business goals and original project sponsors, rather than getting mired in a one-track IT perspective. For example, if internal management reporting data is going to be affected, there may be legal or regulatory implications beyond the accounting or financial groups' reactions. On the other hand, you might be surprised that the business unit is willing to compromise on some deliverables to keep a project on track, if you can assure them that these items could be completed in "phase two". Only through open communication can you determine the best overall course of action.

3. To be a respected leader, honor people's time

In planning meetings and status conference calls, stage the agenda so that not all

groups and parties have to be present at all times. Today's project teams consist of heterogeneous groups of insiders and outsiders, from multiple functions such as IT, marketing, business, operations, and work at a variety of levels from division heads to analysts. So being organized and modular is essential to their perception of your professionalism.

You may start the call with 100 people who all have to be involved for the initial 20 minute overview, so everyone understands the same business context. But after that, only core groups have to be involved. If you let everyone know when they have to be engaged and can attend to their "real" work at other times, they will not be checking their Blackberries and emails when you really need them.

Have each party on the phone only when required. In some cases, there may be a weekly call, but if some groups do not need to participate for a given session, give them permission to skip it.

If you are interested in applying these ideas to your current projects, please contact Rafael Pabon at www.shermanhillgroup.com/shgroup1/contact_us.htm.

About the Author

Rafael Pabon combines information technology and Internet expertise with extensive experience in sales, marketing, and strategic management to help companies reach higher levels of scale, scope and profitability. His background encompasses designing knowledge management systems for Fortune 500 companies, managing outsourcing programs for financial firms, and implementing innovative financial, customer support, compliance and sales systems.

Mr. Pabon's clients include Morgan Stanley, Thomson Financial, JPMorgan Chase, Advanta Growth Capital LP and Dover Corporation. Recent engagements include a four-year technology and operational outsourcing project for an investment bank, development of technical infrastructure to fulfill SEC regulatory requirements at a brokerage firm, and performing due diligence for an early-stage fund. As CTO of Loan Quorum.com, he oversaw the design and development of an international trading system for syndicated loans. Previously, he marketed fixed income and derivative products at Barra International, a global financial software and consulting firm, where he launched the New York branch. Prior to that, Mr. Pabon honed his technical and management skills in JP Morgan's Strategic Programs Management Group, IBM's Development and Sales & Marketing divisions and Kodak's Graphics Imaging Systems. Mr. Pabon holds an MBA from the Stanford Graduate School of Business, with concentrations in investment analysis and business strategy, and a BSE from Princeton University in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

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