

15356 PROJECT PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENTS

POST-WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PAPER:

REFLECTIONS ON PROJECT REFORM

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ABSTRACT

With reasons for project failure remaining unchanged since Harvard Business School first published the common causes, organisations are faced with situations where the focus is less about what the causes of failure are but rather what the early warning signs are and what are the response mechanisms. It's imperative that as project managers we put in place tools to recognise the early warning signs of project failure and implement strong processes to reform projects that are on the path to failure. This paper examines the process of change that a large and complex relocation project went through during the early stages of project failure. The paper discusses several failed attempts at change and the eventual process that got the project back on track and allowed the team to achieve immediate and ongoing success. The tools used to improve success include critical reflections, the discovery of common themes through the use of affinity diagrams and the use of personality traits to assign roles. The key lessons learnt were shared and this allowed the team to continue its success and ultimately restore faith with their client and secure future business.

Key words: Resource Assignment, Lessons Learnt, Reflection Process, Change Process and Project Success/Failure.

INTRODUCTION

I work in the somewhat niche market of project management. The projects that I work on while considerable in size have lower dollar values and often precede or follow a major construction project. The field is Relocation Management and is generally centralised around moving people from one office to another and everything in between. These projects are often the result of a new building being built, when a building is targeted for demolishing or refurbishment or possibly because companies like moving people around for the fun of it.

I've been working in this field for over five years now and have worked on a number of large projects for big organisations: Relocating 1400 people in a single weekend for a government department. Moving seemingly endless amounts of staff around the Sydney CBD for one of Australia's big four banks. Relocating a service depot with 20+ years worth of equipment and machinery used for maintaining Tasmania's water network and even relocating a Premier to his brand new office. The project that I will discuss in this paper was a large and complex relocation for a major Australian University. This was a project that after a month or so was in serious trouble of failing to meet its deliverables. The issues that were arising were crippling the project team and causing rifts amongst them, all the while creating a frustrated and concerned client.

PROJECT BRIEF

The client; as mentioned above, is an Australian University, for ease of discussion I'll just refer to them as 'The University'. The University had recently finished building a new on campus to serve the need for better quality research and teaching space for their microbiology faculties. The new building comprised of six floors plus three basement levels with an area of approximately 49,500 square metres. It contains several very large shared research laboratories, a large teaching laboratory, a clinical research facility, bio-bank store, pathology museum and workspace for 900 researchers and 1500 undergraduate students.

The relocation was divided into six stages with each move consisting of 5-10 research

groups. Each stage would involve the engagement of a number of specialist suppliers to complete all the necessary work to relocate laboratories of this type. This included specialists to decontaminate the equipment, relocate the chemicals, biological samples and the sensitive equipment needed for their research.

My company who had just completed the two previous stages of this project decided to assign eight resources to the project. A Project Director (PD), three Senior Project Managers (SPM), a part-time Senior Project Manager (PSPM) and three Project Facilitators (PF).

I was assigned as one of the SPM's and the workload was divided.

REFLECTION

ISSUES & CAUSES

Soon after beginning the project, issues began to arise: this can be somewhat common on a project that is under pressure to deliver under restricted time constraints. To begin with the engagement of suppliers was becoming troublesome and involved a very cumbersome process. The client's Project Director had instructed the project team to manage the internal procurement, however it soon became apparent that this process wasn't clearly defined or entirely possible for an external resource to manage. Internally the assigning of the workload was made too early in the process; before it was fully understood what the actual workload requirement would be to fully complete the deliverables. These issues began to snowball as the project progressed and tasks were being left half completed and were often rushed to meet the tight deadlines. In this situation the process of delegating or handing over is further complicated if competent resources are not available: Which on this project they were not available.

The last significant issue had compounding outcomes; the project involved the reporting to a number of stakeholders in a fairly complex and political environment. This wasn't being managed well, the team member responsible for this process lacked the experience of reporting on this scale and wasn't being supported by the PD or supporting the project team in this role. Team members were removed from essential tasks to report on project issues previously reported in team briefings and issue logs. This resulted in a rift in the project team with an inferior image of the capabilities of certain members of the team starting to surface. The project was on a path to failure similar to that as described by Weaver (2014) in his article 'Why are so many projects setup to fail?'. He summarises Harvard Business School's basic reasons why projects fail with four key reasons:

1. Unclear objectives leading to inadequate scope definition and the consequential underestimation of time, cost and risk.
2. Wrong leadership from the sponsor down, leading to poor decision making, inadequate skills in the team and a failure to invest in team formation.
3. Poor or no planning leading to unrealistic timescales and ineffective controls.
4. Poor communications and a lack of stakeholder consultation/management.

Already this project was showing signs of achieving three of the four reasons above with underlying issues that could be attributed to the fourth reason.

ATTEMPTS TO CHANGE

The first attempt at change was to simply reassign tasks to even the workload out and continue with the delivery. A quick briefing was held and it was announced that roles needed to change and after a short discussion the workload was evened out. When the opportunity for feedback came about, two of the team members expressed the need

for a better reporting structure and an attempt be made to reduce the amount of meetings all team members had to attend. It was decided that one team member would have the responsibility of managing all the project reporting allowing the other team members to focus on the delivery tasks. This attempt highlights the first real failure of the project team; as no real attempt was made to facilitate a lessons learnt workshop to uncover what the real issues were. As Bruse (2013) describes in his paper on the four cardinal sins of the lessons learnt workshop ‘project successes, failures and improvements are often the result of the actions of multiple individuals, and the interactions between them.’

The next attempt at change was to introduce a new resource, the resource while lacking experience in projects of a similar nature, or project management, was well experienced in procurement and supplier engagement. If anything this attempt caused more damage to the project than any other, the resource wasn’t able to adapt to the environment or create any real value to deliverables. This short-lived attempt created a detrimental rift within the team and deliverables were further set back as the resources were unable to transfer the explicit knowledge developed, build on it or transfer it into tacit knowledge. Using Nonaka and Takeuchi’s SECI (1991) model this can simply be attributed to a failure in moving between the four modes of knowledge conversion. See Fig1.

As Grzybowska and Gajdzik (2013) summarise from the field of ecology ‘survival of an organism depends on its learning pace... if the level of learning is lower than the dynamics of occurring changes then the organism dies.’

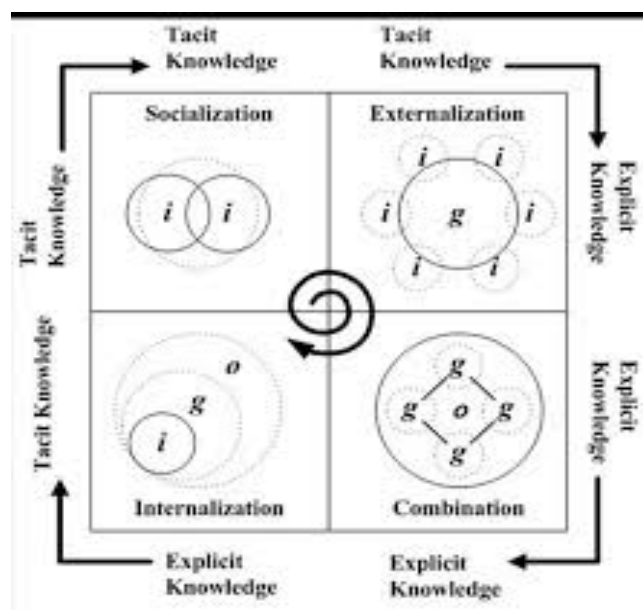


Fig1 - Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1991

i = individual g = group o = organisation

The final attempt at change was an honest attempt to uncover the issues. The plan was to conduct a series of interviews with each team member to gather feedback and look for common trends. However ambitious the plans were it was executed with a level of bias that in turn compromised the results. Despite this, some accurate information of the issues was gathered and ultimately got the fueled the next and more successful attempt at change.

THE PROJECT REFORM

The final change process was a detailed and engaged process that all team members were able to benefit from. The process began with gathering what was known and then building on this using an Affinity Diagram: which helps to form an organised pattern of thought (Project Management Institute 2013). Key issues were gathered and then assessed, the next step was a key shift to become a more supportive organisation through expert coordination (Faraj and Sproull, 2000) for specialist tasks of reporting to the project executives and complex stakeholder management; this was in the form

of a new PD. This was a key area where previously the team had failed: the information presented was vague and lacked what the project executives and client needed to make decisions on project outcomes. This shift in high-level reporting was the first reform that allowed for a more streamlined approach.

Again roles were defined and reassigned, however, this time feedback was listened to and responded to. The team was analysed for its strengths and weaknesses and it was derived that previous team assignments relied too heavily on personal desires and resource needs. Team roles were then assigned in a similar fashion to that of the Belbin team roles (Belbin, 2010), a well established theory not only on how teams function but also how to develop a team using personality traits. This was a key change to the project and ultimately reduced the resource demand of the project and created efficiencies through smart resource assignment and management.

Processes quickly began to adapt and improve based on this new structure and where previous discussions about clunky and restrictive client systems and procedures failed, assistance and options were provided to allow the project to grow and improve. This again was a pivotal shift that had a two-fold effect: the project became more efficient and accurate to the deliverables and the project team became fluent and practiced in the client's systems and procedures. Very quickly these changes allowed the project to gain momentum and began restoring the image of the project team in the client's eyes.

FLOW ON EFFECTS

The performance improvement that the project team went through; while trying and frustrating, gave a new level of demonstrated experience and highlighted their ability to deliver complex projects. With this revised and honed approach it was clearly demonstrated that the team had the experience and capability to deliver further complex projects. This was one of the major benefits with the client extending the contract and offering the opportunity to commence work on a number of new projects following the successful completion and closure of this project.

In reflection apart from the obvious signposts indicating that change was needed, a further understanding was developed as to how one can critically analyse individual performance and that of a team throughout a project. In addition, how thorough the implementation of a reflection process a more structured path to change can be recognised. This process of constant reflection is supported by several project management competency standards and discussed by Cicmil et al (2006) highlighting that 'Participative critical reflection over the intuition – the self and the group' is a key competency of the Expert Standard. This process is however better described by Dick (2002) in his discussion on Action Learning in which the 'user profits from the use of a cyclical or spiral process alternating action with critical reflection. This process encapsulates the process of critical reflection where by the action takes the form of change, improvement or implementation and the research consists of learning and understanding.'

From this project I have taken away several key learning points of how I can better manage my own performance, my team's performance and that of the projects I deliver. Firstly the need for a constant peer review process to ensure the deliverables are appropriate and of the standard required by the client. Secondly the need to assign the right resource to the right task and how important it is to understand how others work together to achieve a common goal. Lastly and most significantly is the process of constantly and continually asking how 'That' went and how 'It' could have been better.

CONCLUSION

This project is a strong medium for analysing the benefits of reflection in a live project context. The project demonstrates how if not applied appropriately results will be minimal and have a negative impact on the project. The example establishes how that if applied correctly improvement can be achieved and project success can be obtained.

The key lessons learned summarised from the project of peer reviews, smart resource assignment and critical analysis of results and the implementation of a continuous and strong project reflection process. This is supported through theories such as Belbin's Team Profiles, Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model, and Action Research.

Through the implementation of reflective practice; in particular the processes discussed in this paper, not only can efficient practice and targeted performance to achieve success be ascertained but also more importantly these practices will help to reduce the risk of project failure. I have throughout the process of reflection and reviewing the performance of this project reminded myself of a quote which I believe demonstrates the need for reflection and the need to review one's own performance 'We are what we repeatedly do, excellence then, is not an act but habit.' Aristotle, (n.d.).

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