

Reach the Always Valuable “Efficiency” within Projects

By Francisco Ambriz

Project success not only relies on attaining results, it is also important that these results be aligned with organizational strategy, as well reaching them in a sequential manner in accordance to the original plan throughout its life cycle.

It is a pressing priority today that corporations need to do more with less. This concept is nothing new. We have listened to the word “efficiency” within organizations, “efficiency” within businesses and “efficiency” within projects. Through time, this concept changed from something that helped us differentiate our company from others to become an obligation. If today we are unable to reach an “efficient” level in everything we do, it is certain that in a very short time we will be out of the global market and possibly “up to our necks” in debt and excessive expenditures as a consequence of the unsatisfactory execution of our projects.

As time goes by, it is more common to require the help of experts to execute our projects. It is undeniable that the support of personnel with ample experience in a varied array of topics, thoroughly prepared and with the right service attitude to improve project objectives (and thus attain coveted “efficiency”) is valuable. Certainly, if we try to carry by ourselves the activities we are not familiar with, we will be required to invest larger effort and probably doom to failure our attempt to be “efficient”.

When Project Management consulting services became more widely accepted, organizations dedicated to this task rapidly began to grow, using as their main selling point their experience and mastery of the PMI methodology. Many of these organizations were newly created, and their personnel, in most cases, lacked the appropriate consulting experience, personnel and customer relation skills, good leadership, and support structure to follow up all the project activities. This is one of the main reasons why we must select the best personnel available; it is they who will carry out the execution of all our projects.

Today there are a very large number of organizations that offer consulting services in Project Management. Many of these assume that a consulting effort is quite simple and easy, and that up to a certain extent they have a very small responsibility for the end result. It is easy to demonstrate that those who are in charge of project execution are not fulfilling their assigned activities. However, this should not be the main job of the project consultant, who must be directly involved with the results and, with the coaching and support to the Project Manager, must not lose sight of the “whole” environment.

A very important aspect for the consultant is that he must demonstrate that he is helping the organization to grow and to increase the project value to everyone involved. This is in addition to the achievement of every result. The project management consultant must always remember the use of all international standards available.

The role of the Project Manager is both wide and versatile, because having experience only in projects is not enough. He/she must:

- Have a complete vision of the business
- Have the required knowledge of all Project Management, Portfolio Management and Program Management standards
- Have strong leadership qualities (be able to influence others without demonstrating hierarchical power)
- Have clearly defined project needs and objectives
- Have clear organizational strategies
- Identify all roles and responsibilities of project stakeholders
- Be familiar with conflict resolution techniques
- Possess good abilities to observe and analyze
- Work under pressure
- Have the ability to perform simultaneous activities
- Be familiar with how projects from different areas are controlled
- Always be updated in new methodologies and software

In general, a project manager must be a juggler with total command of various competencies and multi-disciplinary abilities, and whose priority is to reach the planned results as expected by the organization.

One of the key aspects a consultant must never lose sight of is to constantly review the project's global objectives, not only the phase that is being developed at that moment in time. To accomplish this, all monitoring and control systems for the project must be in effect, defining from the beginning what will be the measurement criteria within time and cost. In most projects, we realize what has been missing once we begin to monitor and control its execution. This means that the cost distribution, labor time or weighted percentages that we use when we define the project plan and establish the baseline are the same that we will abide by at the moment we present an activity performance report; not doing so means that we can make the mistake of reporting delays or performance that is not real, directly affecting all project results.

Another issue we always overlook in consulting efforts is knowledge transfer. We often believe following all normal procedures in full is more than enough, but this is a complete misconception. We can use the best Project Management software, or the best widely recognized professional standards, but if we are not able to have a team with the appropriate knowledge, it is practically guaranteed that all efforts undertaken by the consultant to improve results will not be as fruitful as expected.

It is very important to make sure that we provide adequate training to everyone involved in projects, identifying which knowledge should be reinforced by which team member. For example:

- The project sponsor must have all necessary knowledge to read and interpret project performance reports issued by the project team with the objective of making the right decision and supporting the team in achieving better results.
- Team members must have all necessary knowledge to plan, execute, and create performance reports, as well as to control performance of all project activities.
- The client should also receive a brief training session on how to read and interpret project performance reports in order to determine when their collaboration might be needed in order to obtain a real point of view regarding the most updated delivery date for the product.

Some organizations tend to confuse consulting services with outsourcing services and have the idea that the PM consultant will help them do all the work, yielding as a result all acquired knowledge upon the organization. However, this is unrealistic and its human resources are never able to obtain the appropriate knowledge regarding Project Management. Hence, it is necessary from the beginning to establish a realistic training program aimed at the main stakeholders of the project.

Last but not least, it is very important that the consultant establishes close contact with upper level management within the organization. This will make the completion of all of the project's results a much easier task.

In brief, today an "efficient" Project Management consulting effort is a continuous advantage within an organization for the attainment of its strategic objectives.

When organizations acquire a level of maturity in Project Management their need to use consulting services will decrease, as the organization has developed its own methodology, works with high quality standards and in accordance to the market, has achieved a steady continuous improvement process and, most important of all, has acquired the coveted project "efficiency".

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