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"Winning the Project Relay Race"

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Introduction

Every project consists of many processes in which various products pass many hands ("baton exchange"): documents, knowledge and products in different levels of maturity. These baton exchanges entail many risks which are likely to affect the success of the project. This article will focus on the risks involved in "baton exchange" and will propose possible ways of coping.

Project is a Collection of "Baton Exchanges"

"Baton exchange" in a project occurs when an intermediate product passes hands between two different functions in the organization. Following are some examples that represent and illustrate different kinds of "baton exchange":

- a. "Baton exchange" from sales to the project manager from the moment the contract is signed. This is usually relevant in client oriented projects.
- b. "Baton exchange" from the product manager to the project manager in product development projects as well as transfer of requirements documents for project kickoff.
- c. "Baton exchange" from the product manager to the development or production group: requirements and designs.
- d. "Baton exchange" between various development groups (happens a lot): knowledge, designs, code files (if referring to software) and partial products.
- e. "Baton exchange" from the development to QA and back (happens a lot): products and intermediate products, information about bugs, information on the system environment.
- f. "Baton exchange" that occurs because two people are changed during the project.
- g. Additional examples: from the QA to the installation staff, from the project manager to the procurement department and vice versa, from the project manager to the customer support manager and so on.

Caution, There is a "Baton Exchange"!

Every "baton exchange" involves investment of resources and time: preparing the product for transfer, coordinating and organizing the transfer, transferring the product itself (sometimes involves physical transfer and even transportation), instructing the receiving side and more. These resources are usually intended for the transfer itself and do not essentially contribute to the progress of the project. For illustration purposes, in most cases this transfer is not considered as an assignment on its own but as a built-in activity which is not dealt with. Furthermore, "baton exchange" which ended successfully does not necessarily advance the project's performance measures.

The risk in unsuccessful "baton exchange" can be realized in two ways:

- a. **Investing the transfer's resources in a wasteful and inefficient manner.** Usually it takes longer than planned to successfully complete "baton exchange". This can be caused from lack of attention or from an extreme approach of inline work. Examples:
 1. In many cases of "baton exchange" from development to QA, it takes longer than necessary to gather all the required information and the relevant system components.
 2. Building the testing environment sometimes begins only after the official announcement regarding the completion of the development rotation.
 3. Sometimes starting the implementation processes begins only after installation which results in unwanted delays.
- b. **Loss of important information during the transfer.** Loss of information can damage the project in the long term. Examples:
 1. Transfer of inadequate information between the project manager and the procurement staff can lead to a mistake in order, great financial loss and significant delay in the project.
 2. When "baton exchange" between the product manager and development there are requirements that could be misunderstood. To correct the wrongs at a later stage of the project – serious costs.
 3. Installation staff sometimes encounters difficulties which were already known to the development staff and/or testing staff.

4. When people are replaced during a project, the replaced person does not share his experience with the person replacing him.

One of the main reasons for these problems is related to the fact that in various stages of the project there are managers who are responsible for the sub-tasks beyond the comprehensive responsibility of the project manager. The risk is that everyone does the maximum in his area but conducts the "baton exchanges" incorrectly. Everyone is busy meet his milestones without thinking of the milestone of the person after him.

From this point of view, the "baton exchange" presents a weak link requiring the project manager's special attention. In addition, these managers are also responsible for giving estimation of costs for their part. And who estimates the cost of "baton exchange"?

As there are lots of baton exchanges in a project – it is a matter of large accumulative risk. The objective is to minimize it.

Proactive Management of "Baton Exchange"

It can be assumed that "baton exchange" is a risky process and therefore a lot of time should be allocated to it in advance. However, a project manager can take a proactive approach and even succeed to make "baton exchange" processes more efficient.

In fact, "baton exchange" in a project is a process in which it is very advisable to invest to make it efficient:

1. The process is under the project manager's control: "baton exchange" is an internal process, less connected and dependent on clients (although there is a final "baton exchange" to the client which is part of the project delivery stage).
2. There is a managerial hole and therefore a small chance of stepping on the duties of other managers.
3. The solution will reduce risks in the project from the aspect of time and resources as well as the quality aspect.
4. There are many "baton exchanges" in a project so it is possible to improve and learn during the project.

In order to define the principles for successful "baton exchanges", we will compare the project to a "relay race": a sporting competition which is based entirely on baton exchange. This is the name of the game: to beat everyone (speed and efficiency) but not to drop the baton (caution and coordination).

Principles for Successful and Quick "Baton Exchange"

1. Every runner in the race has to do the maximum in his part and run the fastest: "How do I do my part better in a manner that will serve the project?" Before "baton exchange", the focus and thought pass to the next runner: "How do I supply the manager responsible for the next stage the best opening conditions **from his point of view?**"

Examples: completion of documentation, assemblage of all documents and products, tying loose ends, debugging and allocating interpersonal overlap times.

2. The next runner runs and accelerates even before he has the baton in order not to lose momentum during the exchange and to maintain the advantage and the ambience. Examples: involvement of managers of later stages in the initial stages of the project (testing, installation, assimilation and operation), preparing the testing environment before receipt of the development products, completion of information gaps in preparation for accepting responsibility in the project.
3. The baton is not released until it is certain that the next in line has a firm grasp on it. In a project this is realized in a prominent manner regarding releasing the resources of each stage. Even after a successful exchange, the manager should be available to accompany and support the next manager, if required, in the next stage of the project.
4. The one who starts – has to create the initial effect. To start a race correctly and to start a project correctly –to involve everyone, to prepare the correct infrastructures to manage the project. This is the role of the project manager. Examples: To create the "team spirit" of the project management staff, to decide on the work tools to manage the project, to make sure to align the requirements and the terminology, etc.
5. The last runner has to give the "final punch". In relay races it is customary that the last runner is always the fastest runner. In a project it is equivalent to being the most flexible and/or most thorough capable of best coping and "tolerating" the possible fluctuations in a project.

Examples: The work plan of the installation department should allow flexibility and response in a short time in case the project is early or late compared with the original plan.

Winning the Project Relay Race

The role of the project manager is comparable to the role of the team coach of the relay runners. At some point "baton exchange" is done successfully without eye contact. The secret of success is in building the team and non-stop training. Similarly, the role of the

project manager (or projects management department) is to make the different managers succeed in "baton exchanges" by emphasizing correct work processes:

1. To make managers understand their dependency on each other in order to succeed in the project, by putting emphasis on "baton exchange" processes. The insight that has to be common is that responsibility for on-time "baton exchange" while making sure that it does not fall rests on the shoulders on the two sides involved. Like in a relay race, the medal is awarded for team work as well as for personal work.
2. Building the relevant management team which includes all the relevant role players. The purpose of this is to enable each one to become familiar with the needs of each department and manager to ensure the project's success.
3. To encourage communication between departments and managers by means of supportive technology (information and projects management systems) and by correct management of meetings.
4. Drawing conclusions during the project, adjusting modifications in work processes and implementing them in the following stages.

In conclusion, it is advisable to consider "baton exchange" as a risk in the project. However, it can equally be considered as an opportunity to make a process more efficient which will be useful in the current project as well future projects.

Good luck!

Remarks:

1. *The comparison to a relay race is to emphasize the skills required during "baton exchange" in a project. There are cases which a comparison to other sports can be more relevant such as basketball etc.*
2. *You can also read about improving processes in a project in an article that was published in the June issue: <http://www.pmworldtoday.net/tips/2009/june/Maintaining-Resources-in-a-Project.html>*
3. *Thanks to Tomer Dor for his contribution to this article.*

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