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Maintaining Resources in a Project – From Threat to Opportunity

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About the Role of Project Manager in Encouraging Efficiency Processes

The Challenge of a Project Manager

The basic role of a project manager is to reach the project objectives while maintaining the given resources. There are two main methods for maintaining the resources:

- a. To prevent resource deviations in advance
- b. To react correctly to local deviations – in a way that will not affect the overall project resources

In this article I will present an additional strategy: utilizing the potential for improving processes during the project itself. I will present characteristics which require attention prior to intervention (aim of which is improving the project), examples for improving processes as well as the principles that are required in this regard.

The Common Methods for Maintaining the Project Resources:

1. Risk Management: Good risk management includes prevention plans in order to reduce potential resource deviations originating in risks and contingency plans in case the risk happens.
2. Manage buffers at various levels: A method used mainly to manage aspect of time although it can also be included in the budget aspect. In principle this method enables "absorption" of local deviations in the project in a way that will not affect the whole project.
3. Scope management: In a dynamic world, new demands appear in all stages of the project. Every new demand jeopardizes the ability to stay within the frame of the project. Even where a new demand is budgeted separately (additional money or time) – a "hidden" complexity is added: the effort to learn it by all the partners in the project and integrated into the current programs. Careful change management improves the chances of maintaining the resources.
4. Completion of work at irregular work hours (nights and weekends): There are managers who view this as a method to maintain the project resources (in the time aspect) but in practice this method sometimes comes at the expense of the budget resource and usually at the expense of the human resource and the employee's satisfaction.

There are a variety of methods, **but what is common to all is that they assume given productivity**. This assumption is indeed the given reality in the eyes of the project managers. Apparently, it is not possible to make significant changes in the short time that the project is conducted. However, there is another kind of solution: improving existing processes (**to produce more from the given resources**). For this purpose the processes in the project need to be examined to find the areas that can be made efficient.

Identification of Potential for Improving During a Project

In order to enjoy the positive influence from improving on the ability to maintain the project resources, it is necessary to identify the relevant processes for improving.

A good process for improving during a project is characterized by the following features:

1. **The process that can be controlled by the project manager:** This condition disqualifies in advance all the procedures in which the main efficiency is in external elements such as suppliers, public bureaucracy, customers, etc. Regarding intra-departmental processes (as opposed to inter-departmental processes) – this greatly depends on the dynamics between the managers. Usually this refers to a process controlled by the department manager and not the project manager but the project manager can offer, assist and recommend.
2. **Process that requires unreasonable time and/or money:** Resources are required for every kind of process. However, the question is if this is moderated correctly (reasonable cost-benefit ratio). The analysis process itself can use many resources and therefore an intuitive diagnosis must be performed during the project planning stage.
3. **Possible, simple and cheap solutions exist:** A solution that requires investment of additional resources can be relevant for the company for the long term but this is not possible for the project manager (as his objectives are to limit the quantity of resources). Accordingly, there are solutions that should be carefully examined: purchasing work tools (time and money), enlist additional manpower, extended training, long assimilation of complex and new processes, etc.
4. **The solution will be relevant within the project time frame:** For the project manager, maintaining the project resources by improving processes is relevant only if the improving will be felt during the project itself.
5. **Process which repeats itself in various stages of a project:** This is a condition increases the ability to enjoy the results of the improvement. The profit from the improving will be doubled in the number of times that this process is repeated during the project. In addition, since real improving also demands training, it can be assumed that the level of improving will grow as the project progresses and with it savings in resources.

Examples of Processes that can be Made Efficient

There are a number of potential processes for improving within a project-oriented framework that answer most of the conditions described above. Following are examples:

1. **'Passing the torch' during a project:** There are many incidents of 'passing the torch' (knowledge, products, resources) during a project between various groups and people. In many cases these "unproductive" processes put a great demand in the short term. In addition, unsuccessful 'passing the torch' has great negative affects on the project resources at the project-oriented level. This matter definitely deserves expansion (another article) since it concerns many projects, contains great potential for improving and includes a whole world of solutions.
2. **Process of information flows between groups in the project:** Opposed to "passing the torch", this refers to information that flows frequently and continuously between various groups: changes in requirements, changes in schedules, updates, etc. Sometimes information unavailability can cause direct delays in the project or delays resulting from inadequate communication and misunderstandings. Accordingly, there could also be budgetary influences on the project (inappropriate purchase and such). These processes can be made efficient by intelligent use of relevant technologies (e-mail, telephone, website, management tools, knowledge, etc.), weekly meetings of the relevant parties, terminological coordination at the start of the project and more.
3. **Making decisions in effective discussions:** Discussions have a great influence on time resource in a project. We are not talking about the quality of the decision but of the quality of the decision-making process. "Waste of time" is the first fifteen minutes that usually goes to waste before the discussion begins, through the forty-five minutes in which the discussion is held ineffectively and ends in the week that follows in preparation of material for the next discussion (materials which could have been ready for the current discussion if there had been preliminary organization and advance notice). A small contribution to the culture of the discussion – big contribution to the times in the project.
4. **Completion of scope and plans of the project:** The understanding today is that the planning stage never ends. Nonetheless, the definition "the critical initial mass" is important to the success of the project. The processes at these stages are characterized by much communication with different people (external customers, marketing, development, purchasing and others). This multiplicity of actors makes it very difficult to maintain the resources of this stage and therefore creative thinking is required for improving the process: focused workshops instead of exchanging letters and documents, "role reversal", using management tools, knowledge and supportive technology or similar.

So how can processes be made efficient during a project?

In order to make the processes efficient during a project, we must define lesson-learned breaks. If the project is conducted in cyclic method then it is natural to define these observation points from cycle to cycle. In these times it is necessary to invest time in learning. The time that is invested has to be proportional to the length of the cycle and in most cases one or two meetings will suffice.

The meeting has to be conducted in an open atmosphere and to include participants from different groups taking part in the project. During the meeting, it is best to use documentation of the events that have already occurred in the project (if there aren't – it is advisable to start investing in this).

Important principles for successful improving process in a project:

- a. To be focused in one or two processes (maximum benefit, minimum investment)
- b. These chosen processes should be agreed by the different people involved.
- c. To get the management approval regarding the improvement target as part of the project. This cooperation will increase the commitment to success of the relevant people.
- d. Not to step on areas of responsibility of other managers (not to conduct an inner-group improvement process for instance). In addition, it must be remembered that the objective of the process is to improve and not finding who to blame.
- e. Creating a feeling of success during the work. It is therefore recommended to measure the situation before and during different stages of the project. Suitable and simple measures must be found: for instance, the time that passes from announcement of the completion of development and the real time that the QA started (can be measured at every cycle). Another example: type and quantity of documents in an accessible location of the project and the number of people using it.
- f. To learn from mistakes or successes in the past. If there is an organized description of what was done in other projects – it is advisable to use it. If not then it is advisable to briefly interview associate project managers.

Summary

A project manager has a defined and clear task: reaching the project objectives while maintaining the given resources. However, most projects suffer from resource deviation (financially or time aspect) and the project managers strive to reduce it. Most of the common methods focus on creation of a project-oriented cover to absorb the local deviations in a way that will not affect the general frame of the project. However, the project manager has the

opportunity "to do more with what you have" by improving existing processes. The project manager's challenge is to find the right process for improving in a way that will give maximum results in the time frame of the project.

In most cases, the common target for improving (and its realization) unifies the project team and the person with positive influence for additional activities in the project.

Use of projects for the purpose of improving processes can also greatly assist the company to learn during movement. In such a situation, the company can enjoy not only the direct and short-term products of the project but from the long-term fruits of good management.

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