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Green Project Management: A Project Management Focus on the Environment

By Andrea Krasnoff, PMP

Green, environment, sustainability – these are words that continue to become more and more common in everyday vocabulary. Globally we are recognizing that natural resources are limited and we are taking steps to preserve these resources. In our personal lives, some of the most common environment-related discussions include neighborhood and school recycling programs, environmentally friendly vehicles, carpooling, and water usage. However, our profession seems to be in its infancy in applying green standards.

At first glance, it appears that any project team could take steps to recycle and reduce the use of resources. This may include reducing the amount of documentation that is printed, and using workflow capabilities to cut down on the movement and approval of paper documents. Project team members may also be required to shut off computers and printers nightly if this reduces electrical use.

Another area that has received attention within Information Technology is in building and running data centers. It makes sense to focus our attention to building environmentally friendly products. It seems that we can also consider the environmental impact in the decisions that arise while building these products.

“GreenPM” (green project management), coined by Tom Mochal and Andrea Krasnoff of TenStep, Inc., is a concept in its infancy with a goal of incorporating an organization’s environmental policies into project management processes. It is a model where we think green throughout our project and make decisions that take into account the impact on the environment, if any. It is a way to ingrain “greenthink” into every project management process.

The point about green project management is not that we make every decision in favor of the one that is most environmentally friendly. The point is that we start to take the environment into account instead of ignoring it. You might make most decisions the same as you do today. But there might be some decisions you would make differently.

An increasing number of organizations are establishing environmental policies. We believe that organizations can modify their current project management processes so that these processes support the environmental policies. Let’s consider a couple of examples of “GreenPM” using risk management and communication management.

Risk Management includes identifying risks and determining their probability and impact on a project. When applying “greenthink”, your project team may now analyze each risk’s impact on the environment and how it relates to their organization’s environmental policy. With GreenPM, you may now identify a risk that is defined with a different impact level. This may result in a different risk rating and risk response strategy for that risk.

For example, your project may perform a Proof of Concept with a new technology for your organization. If the new technology is not providing the expected solution, you may then resort to an existing technology. By considering the environment in your initial risk identification and analysis, you may recognize that additional resources (electrical power)

were needed for your Proof of Concept. If your company's environmental policy is looking to reduce its use of such a resource, then the Proof of Concept may now be viewed as a project risk.

Let's look at another example of applying green project management to the Communication Plan. When planning project communications, you look at the stakeholders involved in your project and determine the type and frequency of communications they need. However, do you recognize any environmental stakeholder groups (internal or external) as a stakeholder? Many organizations have individuals responsible for developing Environmental Management System processes. These individuals may represent a new stakeholder group. Your Communication Plan may need to include activities to increase these stakeholders' awareness of your project. Of course, the point of GreenPM is not that this group is automatically added as a stakeholder. The point is to consider whether they should.

As the environment continues to take on an increased focus at all levels in organizations, you may see a move to adopt "greenthink" on your projects. Over time, there will be an increasing number of projects that will factor the environment into their decision making process.

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