

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINTS – MAY 2008

### Getting “Buy-in” to anything “New

By Peter de Jager

If you're a 'doer' of any sort, whether you're a project manager, organizer, supervisor, secretary or just one of those people who make the world go round – then from time to time you're going to stumble across a method or process that you just know will benefit others if only they'll adopt it. You'll then discover, sometimes much to your surprise, that your enthusiasm for the new found solution isn't shared as enthusiastically by those around you.

Welcome to the very common problem of implementing a Change.

If you've been a project manager for any length of time, then you're well aware that we repeat certain processes time and time again. We don't set out to do this consciously, but never-the-less these patterns or processes repeat. A good project manager understands the need to identify, categorize and generalize these patterns and use them consciously. In a sense, the PMBOK® Guide is a collection of common patterns.

There is a flip side to this, there are also patterns of failure, 'solutions' we try time and time again that don't lead us towards our goal. In a sense, that's why we attempt to categorize those that work, because this knowledge then helps us avoid the ones which don't. Good PM practices attempt to steer us towards the successful processes by steering us away from the less effective approaches. Iterative or “Agile” approaches are a current example of this phenomenon.

The “Buy-in” strategy, and even the term “Change Agent” in traditional Change Management are good examples of commonly used unsuccessful approaches to a common management problem. Yes, I'm well aware of the fact that questioning the value of a commonly held belief is heretical, but it is an accurate assessment of the efficacy of “buy-in” and the title of “Change Agent”.

Typically, when we find a good, new solution we get enthusiastic, sometimes wildly enthusiastic, about it. Let's assume we've glommed onto Agile as our most recent discovery. Our immediate strategy is to try and convince others that Agile is the answer to all our project management problems. We want them to 'buy-into' the new idea, we become Change Agents for Agile, after all, we know Agile works. Our approach is to concentrate on the benefits of implementing Agile. Our goal? To get our audience or organization to adopt this proven way of doing things..

And then we're surprised when they respond with, "Why?"

It doesn't matter what new idea we're trying to implement, it could be Agile, or the Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (OPM3), Earned Value Management (EVM), or a new way to tie your shoe laces (google that topic, you'll be surprised how many ways you can tie your shoes), or in what organizational context we're operating, we will always encounter the well meaning "Why?" We then incorrectly, in my opinion, label this innocuous question as 'resistance to change'. We also mislabel this phenomenon as being 'negative' and perhaps even as an 'obstacle to progress'.

The problem we've created is this: We're attempting to sell a solution, before the customer agrees there's a problem.

Here's an experiment, we'll make it incredibly simple. Walk into the office next to yours and say to the person, "Stand up." (or "Stand up!" if you want to increase the intensity of the experiment.) What is their response? They will either ask "Why?", or at least think it.

What you just conducted was the simplest of Change Management experiments. The "Why?" you received isn't trivial, you need to answer it in some fashion if you're to get the victim subject to stand.

If you want a more robust experiment, one performed by a PhD, one with 'convincing' statistics, then consider the test performed by Dr. Robert Cialdini (Described in his book, "Influence: Science and Practice" ISBN 0-321-18895-0)

This experiment was conducted at a busy photocopier. The researcher stepped to the front of the queue and asked: "Excuse me. I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine?" The result was that 60% of the time she was allowed to make her copies.

On the next trial she asked instead: "Excuse me. I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?" This increased her success rate (immediately making copies) to 94%.

To test if "...because I'm in a rush" was the deciding factor for the change in behaviour, they changed the opening line to: "Excuse me. I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I have to make some copies?"

Her success rate remained close to 94% at 93%. The initial request with no reason given is 60%, adding even the flimsiest of reasons, 'because' to the unspoken 'Why?' increases that success rate to 93%.

So... if you're trying to implement a new idea, what is your answer to the reasonable question 'Why?' going to be? That this "idea" is better than what you're currently doing isn't enough. That's basically what we're saying when we're enthusiastic and merely sing the praises of a new solution.

What people need to hear is a description of the problem that the new idea is supposed to solve. You cannot sell anyone the benefits of anything until they agree that the benefits are necessary.

So? What problems does Agile, OPM3, EVM or 'X' solve? (Where 'X' is any possible Change you might be contemplating in your organization.) What are the failings of your existing process? Can you point to specific failings which everyone agrees need addressing? Can you measure what it costs in lost opportunity costs? Can you then estimate the opportunities offered by 'X'? If that's too difficult, or circumspect, is it possible to identify an existing outstanding project which has defied completion at great cost to the organization? Can the cost of not completing it justify a different approach? Perhaps trying out 'X' in some limited manner?

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**Peter de Jager** has spoken to more than 50 PMI chapters around the world on the topic of Managing Change in Organizations. Time and time again the audience evaluation has praised him for being highly provocative, challenging to what you thought you knew and irreverently entertaining. If you think you've attended a 'Change Management' presentation, and you haven't yet heard Peter's take on the subject, then you're missing a few key pieces of the puzzle. You can contact him at [pdejager@technobility.com](mailto:pdejager@technobility.com) or read several dozen of his articles on Change at <http://www.technobility.com>.