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Pinpointing the Real Source of Project Management Snafus
by Thomas R. Cutler

Alvin Toffler, author of Future Shock, noted, "It is always easier to talk about change than to make it."

"Success, itself, rests on effective project management, so it's hard to understand why more businesses don't do a better job of it," pondered Mark Woeppel, President and CEO of Pinnacle Strategies. Companies have a habit of dealing with the fallout of project management disasters after they happen, rather than identifying and implementing a workable solution before problems arise.

Poor engineering project processes invariably result in late placement of purchase orders, affecting product delivery; late award of installation contracts, affecting service dates as well as construction cost overruns to catch up. Too often these impacts cause a compromise in scope or features promised and a delay in the delivery of project.

"Change starts when someone sees the next step," suggested William Henry Drayton and eighteenth century American politician. Woeppel believes, "The focus should be on fixing the cause, not the symptom of the problem. We have learned that the root cause of most project management problems is found in how people manage the uncertainty inherent in projects."

The Two Faces of Uncertainty

The most common approach used when dealing with project completion uncertainty is adding safety time into each of the task duration estimates during the planning phase. Often so much time is added to individual tasks that "safety time" comprises the majority of the planned project duration. Fixing the project task estimation strategy is not enough.

A similar improper response to uncertainty can be found in project execution. Many uncontrollable factors make it nearly impossible to determine the actual progress of any project. "Faced with the risk of delivering behind schedule, project managers oscillate between extremes of control. Some will micromanage (managing the due dates of every task). Others will be too hands off (thinking that there is plenty of padding in task estimates). Still others will get so lost in project minutiae they overlook important red-light indicators of deadline problems," warned Woeppel.

The Law of the Project

Parkinson's Law states the amount of work rises to fill the time available to complete it. In projects, it means that early task completions are never reported. Resources will continue to work on "improving" their task or will simply find something else to do until the due date of that task. The result is that only the late finishes are recognized, and the project timeline moves out.

In spite of conservatively estimated project durations, the presence of certain behaviors, cause timelines to increase. Because managers feel they must protect their own performance, in many organizations task estimates are not treated as 'estimates,' they are treated as 'commitments.' Once the people doing the work have conservatively (long) estimated their tasks, the estimates are then passed through several layers of management where they are increased even more. Everyone wants to honor their commitments, thus they pad their estimates of the project's duration to ensure that they can.

RABIT process addresses these entrenched problems and solves them with a strategy known as Critical Chain Project Management. RABIT is an acronym for Rapid Analysis and Bottleneck Improvement Team. When project deadlines are falling like dominoes and problems are multiplying manufacturers need a RABIT. When systemic problems remain unaddressed, every deadline is in constant jeopardy. Each failure to deliver a project as promised, impacts the bottom-line; it also impacts client satisfaction, reputation, and repeat customers.

Woeppel insists, "RABITs are fast. They need to have an immediate impact on project due dates and resource productivity. The methodology uses a proven built-from-within 'focused team' approach to make a

significant impact on project management results in a very short period of time." The process identifies project bottlenecks and implements a strategy that relieves them quickly...usually in a matter of weeks.

The immediate effects of the RABIT process improve the performance of a bottleneck area, to reduce or eliminate work backlog, and sustain the improved throughput levels. The long-term effect of the RABIT process produces a paradigm shift in team behavior...a permanent change for the better that propels the team towards improved productivity and the company towards profitability.

The RABIT process was developed from years of practical experience in critical chain project management and consistently produces dramatic increases in process output. Unlike most process improvement methodologies which include metrics and promise little, Woeppel promises 20% more output in two months.

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