

New Number One Reason Projects Fail – Lack of Discipline?

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Introduction

I have been an avid reader and believer of the long string of studies about why projects fail. Be it Gartner, or Forrester Research, or The Chaos Studies by The Standish Group, or others. The top reasons for project failure has remained fairly constant for a decade or two: requirements, user involvement, executive support, and a few others. Either the requirements were not fully understood, or documented, or agreed to by enough stakeholders, or they changed, or they didn’t change; whatever. Likewise for user involvement and executive support; not enough, too much, wrong kind... I have even taken up the call myself to spread the word about project failure due to these most often cited reasons.

Well, now I am not so sure. I have been giving thought to the underlying causes for project failures. I have been investigating the reasons for these requirements-related malfunctions, user involvement foibles, executive support gaps, and I have been examining some recent project management research and studies. And I have made a discovery – or maybe it is more like a hypothesis – or maybe it is just a question. Isn’t the number one reason projects fail really due to a lack of discipline?

By discipline, I am referring to the degree to which the basic rules of project management are followed, or not followed. I am referring to the ability to behave in a controlled way even in a difficult or stressful situation. I’m referring to the project manager.

A Story

Let me illustrate this with a story. This is story about perhaps one of the greatest project managers of all time. Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell write in their book “Shackleton’s Way” that “From 1914 to 1916, Ernest Shackleton and his men survived the wreck of their ship *Endurance*, in the crushing Antarctic ice, stranded twelve hundred miles from civilization with no means of communication and no hope for rescue. The temperatures were so low the men could hear water freeze. They subsisted on a diet of penguins, dogs, and seals. And when the ice began to break up, Shackleton set out to save them all on his heroic eight-hundred-mile trip across the frigid South Atlantic – in little more than a rowboat. Unlike other polar expeditions, every man survived – not only in good health, but also in good spirits – all due to the leadership of Shackleton.” And what did Shackleton do to achieve this spectacular project success? Did he adhere to schedule, or to cost, or even to the project goal of being the first to traverse the continent of Antarctica via the South Pole? Not at all. His project took several times longer than planned, it was enormously over budget, and he never even set foot on Antarctica. What he did do, however, is stick to the basics. He had the discipline even when confronted with the most disastrous of circumstances to adhere to the basics. For him, the basics of his expedition project included constant communication with his men, not only en masse, but one-on-one as well. He did this during daily standup meetings and in private discussions when he visited with every man every day. He did this when their ship was being crushed by pack ice, he did this when they were drifting in lifeboats, and he did this when they were stranded on a barren pile of rocks in the middle of nowhere. And what did he communicate about? He constantly discussed the objectives of the expedition, the conditions that they found themselves in, and the need to constantly refine, adjust, and eventually change the expedition’s requirements. Together, Shackleton and his men changed the expedition’s goal from exploration to survival. He also discussed how each member of the expedition was doing, how they felt, what they thought, and what they needed. Through the discipline of adhering to a continuous flow of communication they developed a culture and environment where even in the harshest most life threatening conditions his men wrote in the diaries that it was “the best time of their lives.” Shackleton was an experienced exploration project manager, he had led several previous expeditions and he had studied other exploration project managers including Roald Amudsen and Robert F. Scott, he had systematically developed his list of basics from which he would not deviate.

Lets be clear. The point of the story is not so much about which particular basics Shackleton adhered to. The point of the story is that he did adhere to basics. The basics for his expedition project may or may not be the same as the basics each of us need to adhere to. For the less experienced project managers, the basics are more likely to be represented by established best practices and internal organizational procedures. For the more experienced

project managers, the list of basics has likely evolved and been shaped over time based on a combination of best practices, trial-and-error, and wizened judgment. Regardless, I believe that every project manager can and should list a handful of basics that they firmly believe apply to their management of projects. These individual lists of basics are what we must have the discipline to stick to.

A Study

Andrew Crow has recently published a book titled “Alpha Project Managers: What The Top 2% Know That Everyone Else Does Not.” This book captures the results of a survey of over 5,000 project managers and stakeholders and has provided an extraordinary insight into what the top two percent know and do that everyone else does not. This study focused on identifying the best project managers (referred to as “Alpha project managers”) and then on determining what they did that made them the best. Opinions about these project managers were obtained from their team members, their customers, and their management. Opinions were focused on eight specific areas: attitude and belief, communication, alignment, approach and organization, focus and prioritization, issue management, relationships and conflict, and leadership. Some of the study results reveal large differences between what the Alpha project managers believe and do versus the non-Alpha project managers. Although in this study both Alphas and non-Alphas understood equally the importance of planning, the Alphas dedicated double the amount of project time to actually doing the planning. Alphas spent on average a total of 21 percent of all project labor hours on planning. Similarly, both Alphas and non-Alphas equally understood the value of communication; however, the Alphas were viewed by others as being much more effective at performing the actual communication (80 percent for Alphas vs. 49 percent for non-Alphas). The communication they paid the most attention to was with their stakeholders; Alphas constantly asked others for their opinions about the project, and they responded with information tailored to their stakeholders’ interests.

This study demonstrates the value of sticking to the basics. Although virtually all project managers in the study could clearly identify the importance of the basics of planning and of communication, the Alphas had the discipline to actually do them to the degree necessary. As with Shackleton, the point being made is not so much about which particular basics the Alpha project managers adhered to. The point is that the Alpha project managers do adhere to the basics.

Conclusion

So the next time I am reading about the list of reasons for project failure I am going to wonder about whether the real reasons for failure actually appear on the list or if the real reason for project failure is because the project manager did not adhere to the basics? Maybe at its core project management is really about applying common sense with uncommon discipline.