Procrastination – Detection and Avoidance
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Introduction

I have come to think of project management as the language of getting things done. It strikes me as being very much results oriented; focused on the end item deliverable product or service. And for project managers who fully embrace the techniques of breaking work down into manageable tasks the focus involves not just achieving the final outcome, but accomplishing all of the intermediate activities as well. This, after all, is the foundation of the best practice of critical path management.

So why then do we encounter project management situations involving procrastination? Are some project managers putting off doing things because of habitual carelessness or laziness? What is the impact of procrastination when it does occur? How can we recognize procrastination; and how can we prevent it?

For project management procrastination is when a planned task or activity does not begin when scheduled or when an action or decision is not made when it needs to. For the project manager procrastination may occur because of personal attributes such as carelessness or laziness, however, it is doubtful that a significant number or project managers with these characteristics remain project managers but for so long. Procrastination for project managers who have remained in the profession for a significant length of time is more likely to occur for other reasons; it is more likely to occur as a result of wishful thinking (if I just wait a bit things will improve), or as the result of fear (if I act now I may make a mistake), or as the result of a strategy to reduce risk (if I delay the odds of success improve).

It is difficult to tell just how common procrastination is in project management because when it occurs communication barriers can obscure it. For example, is a failure to hold a critical design review as scheduled the result of procrastination or the result of a considered, deliberate, informed decision? The question is hard to answer because if the project manager does not communicate a clear basis or rational for the delay, it could be due to either cause. However, if they can't or won't communicate a clear basis for the delay then perhaps we can correctly assume that some procrastination is taking place.

A Story

Let me illustrate the impact of project manager procrastination with a story. This is story about a dramatic and fatal example of procrastination that occurred in World War II during a project made quite famous by the 1963 movie staring Steve McQueen titled "The Great Escape." Author Mark Kozak-Holland writes about this project in his 2007 book titled "Project Lessons from The Great Escape." He calls the readers attention to the fateful night of March 24/25 in 1944 when during the escape from a German prisoner of war camp a series of significant setbacks occur (frozen trap door, tunnel too short, air raid, cave-ins) causing prisoners who are waiting to crawl through the tunnel to freedom to be delayed and for their progress to be slowed from the planned sixty escapees per hour to only twelve men per hour. In the end only 3 men

actually escaped and made it to freedom, two-dozen men were captured and returned to prison camp, and fifty men where captured and executed. Central to the project outcome was the procrastination by the project manager Roger Bushell during that auspicious night. Why didn't he take action to minimize the impact of the setbacks when they occurred? Was it wishful thinking – if I just wait a bit things will improve? Why didn't he abort the escape when so many things went wrong? Why did his stellar leadership during the planning for the escape become supplanted with procrastination during implementation?

This next story about project manager procrastination is more personal. This story has drama and fatalities too; it occurred in January 2003 during a climb I was making of Mount Aconcagua, the highest mountain in South America. During a three-week period as our climbing team inched our way up over twenty thousand feet we and everyone else on the mountain were hammered by a severe storm. Hurricane force tent-destroying winds, sub-zero frostbiting temperatures, and head-pounding lack of oxygen in the thin air combined to cause seven fatalities. Or did they? I question whether these fatalities, which occurred in climbing teams other than our own, were really due to the conditions. I submit that procrastination contributed to the one fatality that we became personally involved with, perhaps others as well. At five o'clock one morning during a brief lull in the storm a solo climber wandered into our camp quite disoriented and fatigued. He had left his climbing guide higher up on the mountain – dead. They had used the storm lull the previous day to make a summit attempt. When they had not reached their objective by their predetermined turnaround time the climbing guide, ie. project manager, procrastinated. He did not turn around. He kept going. The barely surviving climber had spent the night alone wandering around the upper mountain and only by chance wandered into our camp where we took the actions necessary to save his life. Why didn't the project manager turn around as planned? Was it wishful thinking – if I just keep going things will improve and we will make it to the top? Why did the project manager procrastinate?

While few of our projects may involve the risk of loss of life procrastination can still have damaging consequences. Failure to proceed as planned can lead to schedule slips and associated cost growth, it can snowball and lead to delays in delivery of critical capability, and it can ripple across many of the dependencies that other projects and programs have on ours causing difficulties for the whole system, enterprise, or network.

What To Do

Recognition of procrastination is clouded by the assortment of communication barriers that can be associated with the project manager. Consequently, procrastination is likely easier to observe over time as a pattern emerges instead in a singular event; that way we can distinguish between the random and isolated characteristics of an event that just looks like procrastination and a true procrastinator. On the other hand, screening for procrastination is rather simple and straightforward. All it takes is a test. One quick and almost foolproof test is to task the suspect procrastinator with something that is eminently doable by them in the requested timeframe. This type of test is particularly useful for gauging the procrastination level of an individual with whom you have limited familiarity. The task could be as simple as asking the suspect procrastinator to place a phone call to a third party on your behalf or providing you some information already within their possession. If the task is not promptly done or if it is not followed by other prompt responses, then clear evidence exists of a procrastinator.

Although procrastination can and does occur throughout the project lifecycle its impact may be most noticeable during the implementation stages, just as it was for Bushell during the prisoner escape attempt and just as it was for the Aconcagua mountain climb.

A most effective solution to avoid procrastination is to make as many of the decisions as possible upfront early in the project lifecycle. That way, when the time for implementation comes, little is left to the chance of spontaneous decision-making or procrastination. One powerful technique for accomplishing this advanced decision-making is through planning. Not only can the tasks and activities be planned, but so too can the decisions. For example, the common practice of holding project reviews can be used not for the decision making itself, but for implementing the already made decisions. Thoroughly planned project reviews, also known as control gates, can follow a script that was developed far earlier in the project lifecycle. These control gates are run according to the entry and exit criteria that are pre-established. If the criteria to hold the review are met, in other words, if the criteria to enter the review are met, then the review is conducted according to plan. Similarly, if the review accomplishes what was defined in the set of exit criteria, in other words, if the review does what was intended, then the project proceeds according to plan. If the entry criteria to hold the review or if the exit criteria when conducting the review are not met, then the project does not proceed according to plan. The use of the pre-established criteria reduces the decision-making burden at the review and consequently reduces the opportunity for procrastination. In effect, the decisions were made long ago during the planning phases. Data Item Descriptions (DIDs) are one technique for capturing in written form the entry and exit criteria for project reviews. These one-page documents can be written for each control gate review as well as for each project deliverable. Measuring progress against the DIDs becomes an exercise in comparison between the defined criteria in the DID with the actual event or document that reduces the opportunity for procrastination.

Conclusion

In project management there seems to be little room for procrastination, and the consequences procrastinating can be quite severe. Fortunately, there are tried and true techniques for recognizing it and for avoiding it. I just hope that not too many project managers procrastinate – and put off dealing with it.