



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Your Organization Culture Influences your Project Management Success

It should come as no shock to learn that some organizations are better than others at managing projects. There are probably no organizations that have a 100% success rate, and hopefully none have a 0% success rate. However, some organizations definitely perform at a higher level than others.

Have you ever thought about the factors that account for these differences in success rates? One possibility is that the people in some organizations are just smarter than others. However, think about that statement. Do you really think differences in project success rates are a matter of higher intelligence? Probably not. On the other hand, it may be true that some organizations do a better job training their project managers, so they may be more skilled and knowledgeable in the project management discipline. The way your organization deals with training is just one aspect of your overall organizational culture. There are a number of organizational factors that influence your ability to deliver projects successfully. Here, you will look at two of them – your organization culture and your organization structure.

Culture has a huge impact on your success rate

Your organization's culture has a lot to do with the success rate of your projects. This goes for projects all through your organization, not just you or one particular project.

The term "culture" generally means "how we do things around here." Imagine someone asked you how successfully your organization delivers projects. If you say "we're pretty poor at delivering projects," you are voicing a perception of one aspect of your culture.

There are a number of areas where culture comes into play on projects.

Process orientation. Many organizations have good processes in place, and people generally follow them. This is perhaps the biggest single factor in overall project success. If your organization follows a good, scalable project management process, you are more likely to be consistently successful on your projects. This means that the entire project team generally knows how to create and follow a workplan and can use standard processes to effectively handle risk, scope change and issues.

Governance. Many organizations have processes in place, but no one follows them. This highlights a problem with management governance. In simplistic terms, governance is the management function having to do with making sure people do what they are supposed to do. Typically, if your management structure is engaged and interested in projects, and if they make sure that your project management process is followed, you will tend to be more successful. If every project manager is on his or her own and management support is haphazard, then you will tend to be unsuccessful.

Training. As was mentioned previously, some organizations do a poor job of training project managers. Typically, these types of organizations do a poor job of training in



TenStep Supplemental Paper

general. If project managers generally do not have the right skills (other than from the school of hard knocks) you will not be successful.

Roles and responsibilities. In successful organizations, people typically know the role they play on projects and what is expected of them. This includes active sponsors, interested clients and engaged management stakeholders. The sponsor, for instance, needs to perform a quality assurance role, as well as be the project champion in his or her organization. If your organization starts projects and leaves the project manager in a leadership vacuum, you are not going to be consistently successful.

Culture plays perhaps the biggest role in whether your organization is successful executing projects. If your organization has difficulty completing projects successfully, you cannot blame the project managers. They are only toiling within a culture that is not supportive of their efforts. Managers, including the head of the organization, need to step up and evaluate the project culture. Until the culture changes, project managers will consistently struggle to be successful.

Your organization structure can help or hurt project success as well

To a lesser degree, your organization structure can get in the way of, or help support, the overall success of your projects. This is a lesser problem because, to a certain extent, you can always change your organization structure. In fact, you can change the organization chart frequently, and some companies do just that. Culture, on the other hand, is not easily changed. It can take years for a large organization to develop a culture of excellence (although it does not take nearly as long to fall back into mediocrity).

Some organization structures can definitely impair your ability to deliver projects. First and foremost are organizations where the project team is doing support work. If your project organization does support as well, it usually means that support issues will pop up that take the focus away from the project. A lot of multitasking and thrashing take place as you move from support work to project work to support work. It is usually very difficult to prepare good estimates, and it is difficult to meet your scheduling commitments. You may be forced into this structure if your staff is small.

Your organization structure may also impede the ability to share resources. For instance, if your project team needs a resource with a specific expertise, you may not be able to easily share that person with another functional area. Some of this is also related to your culture. You could ask yourself whether a different organization structure would help. If it would, you may have an organization problem. If it would not help, then your culture is probably not supportive of resource sharing.

Summary

There are a number of organizational factors that support or inhibit the ability of your project managers to be successful. Granted, "culture" is a broad term, but your organizational culture plays the biggest role in whether or not you are generally able to deliver projects successfully. You cannot attack a culture of mediocrity (or a culture of failure) one project at a time. You need to address it in a broad and multi-faceted way. Your organization structure can also help or hinder your success rate. Your organization



TenStep Supplemental Paper

structure can determine how well you focus on projects and how easy it is to share resources between different organizations. If you attack the broader cultural problems, you will have a positive impact on many of the organizational barriers to success as well.