



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Scale Your Project Management Methodology Based on Project Needs

When you mention methodology to many project managers, their eyes roll upward as if to say “Oh no, something else to get in the way of getting my project done on time.” The term methodology often has a bad image, maybe partly because the word itself is long and mysterious.

However, all project managers use a methodology. The term just refers to the processes, procedures, templates and practices you use to manage your project. A better question to ask is whether you use a personal methodology based on experience, or a formal methodology that was defined by your company or purchased from a vendor.

Use Formal Processes on Large Projects

One of the reasons why project management methodology is not utilized as effectively as it should be has to do with scalability, or utilizing the right amount of structure and process based on the size of the project. For example, on small projects, you can get by with very reactive project management. You might manage scope loosely, because the chances of receiving a scope change request are small, and the impact to the project is typically just incremental. Many project managers are not very good at managing risk because small to medium sized projects don't usually have much risk. In many cases, communication with the customer just means telling them when the work is complete.

Those same processes will usually fail miserably on large projects. Let's say you have 50 people and a five million dollar budget. (In some shops even that is considered small to medium!) You have to manage the project proactively. Issues will arise that are too complex and too numerous to manage by the seat-of-your pants. Scope change on large projects is usually a given. If you aren't careful, your five million dollar project will turn into ten million by the time it is done. You need to see risks coming and manage them, or your project will be in deep trouble. Communication with your stakeholders needs to be ongoing, multi-faceted and planned ahead of time. In other words, this is the time when you will be glad to have a full-featured project management methodology to rely on.

Apply Less Extensive Processes on Small Projects

Let's take the other side now. The project starts. You create a 15 page Project Definition document and workplan. You gather your team and look for project risks. You expect weekly status reports from your team members and, in turn, send weekly updates to your customer. Scope change requests require extensive documentation and approval. Does all of this sound good so far? Well, it shouldn't. The entire project is only 200 hours and three weeks in duration.

When this scenario happens, project managers see methodology as burdensome, cumbersome and not adding value to their project. Usually that means that the methodology was defined at a level necessary to manage large projects, and has not been appropriately scaled for smaller ones. The project can still be completed successfully under these conditions, but it introduces inefficiencies and frustration. The project costs



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more than it should and takes more time than it needs to. And remember, there are usually many more small to medium projects in your organization than large ones.

Methodology is Your Friend

As was said up front, the best answer is to apply scalability and common sense to your project management methodology. When a project starts, the project manager and project team need to go through the standard methodology and scale it to the level needed to manage your particular project. If your company went through this exercise already, there may be pre-existing guidelines that you can use based on the project size. The basic philosophy you should follow is “large methodology for large projects – small methodology for small projects.”

Methodology is your friend. It is there to help you be successful on your project. But, keep your friend healthy – not too skinny, not too heavy. Let methodology work for you, not the other way around.