

## Sponsoring Projects: Truth & Fables



**By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA**

**Summary: Comparison of the thinking that leads organizations to repeated project failure versus a best practices approach that yields consistent project success.**

As organizations use projects more and more frequently, a higher and higher proportion of their employees work on multiple projects, putting pressure on their ways of doing projects. Part of the maturation process is to rid the organizational thinking of a number of fables. These fables lead to project disconnects like:

- ❑ Organizations that require detailed data and alternatives before buying \$20,000 of equipment, spend \$500,000 on cross-functional projects, relying solely on the pagan chanting of due dates to ensure success.
- ❑ They carefully define and communicate the authority of a supervisor to assign work and reward performance to a unit of 9 data entry clerks. But they assume that a project manager with 20 people drawn from 6 different departments can get the project done by having everyone hold hands and sing Kum-by-yah.

Let's look at the stages of a project and examine the fables that lead to so many project failures and contrast them with the best practices that lead to project success. We'll take it step-by-step through the lifecycle of a project.

### **Strategic Thinking and Conceiving Project Objectives**

#### **Fables**

It's really best to leave project objectives a little vague, like "delight the customer", because then we can be flexible and adapt as we do the work. This allows us to:

- ❑ Start work on projects very quickly, sometimes even on the first day that the idea is mentioned.
- ❑ Plan the project as we go. Each week's status meeting is a good vehicle in which to plan the next week's work.
- ❑ There is great merit in leaving project team members somewhat uncertain about what result we really want from them on their assignments... this stimulates creativity and "thinking outside the box."

## Best Practices Truths

Before a project can start, a clear and unambiguous business result is identified in measurable terms. Thus, ill-conceived projects don't have a chance of being approved and consuming critical resources that we need on projects with bigger strategic payoffs.

- ❑ We do the thinking about a project's strategic result before we start work and give strategic thinkers the tools to chart a project's course before the first Gantt chart is generated.
- ❑ People are held accountable for delivering specific and objectively measured achievements not just "to do" lists items.
- ❑ Executives control a portfolio of projects to which they allocate resources based on up-to-date performance data to hit strategic objectives.

## Managing the Portfolio of Projects

### Fables

We can add a new priority #1 project each week and routinely move completion dates earlier without consequence because:

- ❑ Project managers can use their leadership skills to squeeze in a few more projects whenever we need them.
- ❑ Setting priorities creates too much conflict between executives. It's best to treat all projects as critical so that everyone is always busy.

### Best Practices Truths

The organization's method for project management forces everyone to play a "zero sum game."

- ❑ We can't start more project than we can finish so as new projects are approved, some old ones must be eliminated.
- ❑ Project team members have a schedule for each project.
- ❑ Project managers always present the trade-offs and consequences of every change based on hard data.
- ❑ Executives carefully allocate resources based on priorities so that "litters of puppy projects" don't eat away at the resources needed to achieve strategic results.

## Building Project Plans

### Fables

- ❑ The quality of our control over a project is a function of the number of lines in the project schedule; 1,900 is good but 9,500 tasks is better.
- ❑ People, regardless of technical knowledge or experience, need to be told everything they have to do.

- ❑ The project schedule is a listing of everything we have to do, it's like a recipe for the project.

## Best Practices Truths

Project plans are a pyramid of commitments to achieve measured results, by a date, within a resource budget (hours & dollars).

- ❑ Project plans are tools for managing a project and spotting problems early. The smallest level of detail is an individual's assigned achievement. We do not provide all the "to dos" in the schedule.
- ❑ Updating the plan each week takes minutes, not hours, and PMs and executives always have data on project status that is no more than 4 working days old.
- ❑ Executives consider alternatives before approving projects and can select from a "menu" of quantified trade-offs between a project's measured results, cost, duration and level of risk.

## Tracking Project Progress

### Fables

The best way to ensure that projects finish on time is to shout the completion date loudly at every opportunity:

- ❑ It really is unprofessional to have people fill out a time sheet with completed work and estimates of the remaining work.
- ❑ Status is best measured with "smile faces," "frowns," or "red lights" and "green lights" which really tell us a lot about how things are going and are more nurturing.
- ❑ When someone does well we praise or reward them in private because we really can't explain to the others why they didn't earn the same reward.
- ❑ A good project manager is a great fire-fighter and doesn't waste time on a lot of paperwork.

### Best Practices Truths

Tracking is a data-driven process in which we measure where we should be "as of today" against where we actually are "as of today."

- ❑ Good project managers spot and solve small problems early, rather than finding out about big problems when its too late to solve them.
- ❑ Executives track progress against specific checkpoints that match a measurable result with a budget and duration.
- ❑ We publicly praise and/or reward high achievement, not a lot of overtime. Everyone sees these rewards as legitimate and earned because the standards for achievement were publicized before we started work.

- Executives have the data to adjust the resource allocation in the portfolio each week to take advantage of opportunities and correct problems.

For additional information on transforming your organization's fables into best practices take a look at our over the [web individual training](#) and our [in person seminars](#) for organizations.