

"Fast-Food" Project Management



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When our project planning is little more than a drive-up window we have projects that produce little business value and dissatisfied users.

When we examine organizations or departments with track records of consistent project failure, we usually see problems at the "front end" of their project process. Instead of business value thinking and a focus on results, we see project order-taking, very similar to the drive-up window of a fast food restaurant.

"Fast Food" Order-Taking

The person responsible for the account stands inside the drive-in window wearing a red and yellow cap that says "We Do Projects." The account drives up in a shiny black car and stops at the drive-up window saying, "I'm hungry."

- ❑ The project management order-taker grins at the account, displaying 163 gleaming white teeth and then gives the account the "thumbs up" signal. The order-taker turns to his or her project team and screams,
- ❑ "You two, put four burgers on the grill!"
- ❑ "Dan, dump some potatoes in the deep fry!"
- ❑ "Monica, we need more buns now!"

The fast food project team has started work and it certainly is impressive how quickly they have begun. The project management "order-taker" gives another toothy grin to the account and says, "We've started work on your project and it will be ready very soon." Now the order-taker, from habit or some need to impress the executive with their technical expertise, decides to get some specifications. "Would you like chopped Bermuda onion and hot jalapeno relish on top? Can we add some of our secret sauce; it has monosodium glutamate. Would you like 1.579 grams or more? We can also add our rare Guatemalan red pepper. Would 6.531 pinches be enough?"

The executive frowns in confusion, then nods agreement with a shrug and says, "I'm on a diet, you know."

The project management order-taker grins that toothy grin and says,



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"Fine we'll reduce the Guatemalan red pepper to 3.00 pinches."

The executive nods agreement, silently deciding to hire a fast food expert to deal with the project management order-taker. Then the executive repeats, "I'm on a diet and can't have a high calorie lunch."

The project management order-taker whirls to face the project team, saying, "You people just don't get the new paradigm. The account is on a diet! Get those potatoes out of the deep fry, take those burgers off the grill and toss those buns in the trash. We need to be chopping lettuce, slicing tomatoes and grading carrots. Let's get to it!"

The project order-taker turns back to the account, thinking this is marvelous responsiveness to the customer's needs. Yes, they truly are customer-oriented and customer service does come first.

The user/client executive waves from the car window trying to get the project management order-taker's attention. The order-taker awakens from the self-congratulatory reverie to hear the executive say, "It's a high protein, low-fat diet that I'm on."

The project management order-taker storms into the kitchen screaming, "You people are doing the wrong thing, we need to..."

Hard work is not the same as success

The sad thing about this order-taking approach is that while both the project manager and the team are working like demons, the odds of their delivering a successful project and having a satisfied account are just about nil. In addition to the likely failure on the project level, their organization's strategic position with this user/client could not be worse. They have acted like order-takers and that's how the user/client views them. Is this project team an integral part of the client's diet program? No, their work is no different from any of the other fast food drive-in chains. As hard as this team is working, they may have already ensured that the client will not be back because they're not giving the executive what he or she wants.

Organizational consequences of order-taking as the front end for projects

When we examine the project portfolio in a consulting firm or IT department where order-taking is the normal front-end process, we see:

- ❑ A preponderance of resources are devoted to small, tactical/technical projects and
- ❑ Users are dissatisfied and eager to use someone else or do it themselves.

These portfolios contain very few projects that are aimed at achieving significant business results for the user or client. In fact, most of the portfolio falls into the "puppy" category where there are large litters of small, strictly technical projects involving little in the way of cross-functional efforts or achievement. The users/clients view these projects as a commodity that could be done as well by anyone else.

At the other end of the spectrum, the portfolios of organizations that have strategic partnerships with their users or clients are quite different. The preponderance of resources are allocated to large, cross-functional, cross-organizational projects where the objective is a significant operational, external or organizational benefit. These organizations receive small orders just like everybody else. But they tend to position themselves strategically and use planning processes that "bundle" small orders into larger projects with more strategic objectives. They also tend to have successful user and client relationships that are rarely disturbed by competition from others.

Elevating your strategic position with the account

Now it's easy to say "let's develop strategic partnerships with clients or users." Doing so is difficult, particularly if we have a history of working with them in the order-taking mode. The nastiest barrier to overcome is that executives no longer sit through the order-taking. Instead they hire their own technical interface people to work with project management order-takers. Thus we have a barrier in the "buying" process between the people delivering projects and the executives who wish to purchase business benefits.

We may also face lower-level user/client management who are so accustomed to placing their orders at the drive-in window that they resent questions we might ask about the business benefits the project should deliver to their department. They think that's none of an order-taker's business.

Where do these barriers lead us? To that gruesome year-end meeting where an executive says, "Look at all the money we've spent on projects with you people! Our operations haven't gotten any better despite pouring all this money down a rat hole!"

So why not go through that gruesome analysis ourselves? That is what account and portfolio management is all about. Account management is not a matter of a new title for the order-taker it's a change in process and vision. We look not only at our overall portfolio of projects but also at each account's portfolio. We do that year-end evaluation continuously, looking at how much money is being spent, what business results are being achieved and evaluating the "yield" of our portfolio for that client/user. Then, we identify our current strategic position with the client/user and plot a course to improve the position in stages, eventually reaching the level where we are functioning in a strategic partnership.

The front-end processes also need to change. We abandon the tactical order-taking where the main objective is to get started quickly. Instead we adopt a strategic selling approach. We develop sufficient information on the user/client's business to be able to move them through a process where we translate the specifics of the current order into a "thread" of measured achievements. This thread leads to business relevant outcomes (MOSTM) at the operational, external or organizational levels. Then we flesh out this thread into a network of High-level Achievements (HLATM) which forms the skeleton of our strategic plan.

We also need to realize that our best technical people may not be the right people for strategic selling. Account management and strategic selling involve talking about the

client/user's business, not the delicious technical details of our business. Let's go back to the drive-in window, because that's what the user is used to, and see how this might work.

Back to the "front-end" and the way it should work

The user or client executive stops at the drive-in window and says, "I'm hungry."

The strategic project manager thinks back through the information about this particular client/user and says, "Well I certainly don't want to give you any of those high calorie burgers, do I?"

A flash of anger washes across the executive's face, "No, I'm on a diet and I'm also in a hurry. When are you going to start work?"

The strategic project manager says, "We'll start after I understand the results you're looking for. I understand you're on a diet but what's the purpose of the diet?"

"I have to reduce my calorie intake."

"Well, we can help you keep the calories under 1200 a day but what's the point of reducing your calorie intake?"

The executive frowns in anger again, "Why are you asking all these questions instead of starting work?"

"Because it's unlikely that you'll be pleased with our work if we don't help you achieve your objectives. So, what's the point of reducing your calorie intake?"

"I want to look good at the beach this summer."

"Well, if you want to have 8 of 10 people think you are an aerobics instructor, we ought to plan not only reduced calorie intake but also add an exercise program to the project plan. In combination they may let you look good at the beach this summer. But what's the point; why do you want to look good at the beach this summer?"

"If I look good at the beach this summer, then maybe I can get a new job as a lifeguard. I'm really sick of the job I've got now."

"We can provide many of the components to reach your objective of employment as a lifeguard. But this project will require involvement from your family and from others."

What the strategic project manager has done in this ridiculous example is a couple of things. First, the project manager has avoided taking on a project that was almost certain to result in a dissatisfied user or client.

Second, the project manager has created a "thread" of measured achievements (eg.1200 calories/day, 8 of 10 think executive is an aerobics instructor) that leads to a strategically significant result. Third, the PM has created the potential for moving from order-taker to strategic partner. This is not to say that the PM will be accountable for getting the new lifeguard job. But the project on which they will work is part of that important strategic result.

Summary

In sum, a strategic approach on the front end of projects produces benefits not only in the project itself but also the portfolio of projects we are doing for the account and in the overall user satisfaction. You may wish to explore these ideas in our Project Repository. Our methodology for [Enterprise Project Management](#) section also offers more information on these topics and building them into an organizational project management protocol. Last, more detailed information on these techniques is available in our textbooks and in-person or [Internet based classes](#).