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Even High-flying PM Aces Can Crash Project-based Organizations

These days there's much talk about, "We're a matrix organization," "We're very cross-functional and project-based," and "Projects are a strategic weapon for us."

These are fine sentiments but few organizations have established processes that foster consistent project success. Let's take a look at how weak organizational PM processes can down even high-flying PMs and how we can succeed in these environments.

The Out-of-Control Tower

From the project control tower we see flight after project flight streaking into the sky. A lone individual mans the tower, never looking out the window but generating reams of printouts detailing what was supposed to happen last month. Some project planes file flight plans and use the runways. Most lift off on someone's whim or hysterical response to a problem, usually with the PM still climbing into the cockpit and team members dangling from the wings. No one knows where they are headed or when they'll land but "by god, we're doing something." There are so many of these unplanned flights that they pose a navigation hazard. They can also snatch team members from larger flights in mid-air using an invisible bungee cord labeled, "We do your performance review here."

Most of the attention is on the jumbo 747 projects lifting from the runway with ponderous magnificence and a lot of noise. Less impressive are the distant towers of smoke billowing from crash sites where jumbo projects have slammed back to earth. The organization redoes the same 747-sized projects over and over again, always giving the new flight a different acronym so no one will realize that the strategic-level problem was never solved.

A large blimp of a project floats overhead, altering course as the political winds in the organization change from improving customer service, to reducing costs, to increasing market share. Oddly, each course change swells the blimp, as if it were an overcooked knockwurst, because new functionalities are added without casting aside any of the old ones.

Dozens of little single engine projects buzz overhead, often causing larger craft to dive to avoid collisions. Some of the little projects fly straight and level courses. Others dip and dive, careening out of control because the windshields are covered with Excel spreadsheet minutia, blocking the pilot's view of anything larger than a micro-task.



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On the runway below the control tower, a jaunty PM flips a white silk scarf over a brave shoulder and climbs into the cockpit of a small project craft. With a crisp salute, the PM revs the engine, streaks down the runway and lifts into the sky. Seconds later anti-aircraft fire rises from several feudal departments near the runway from whom the PM borrowed resources. The tracers reach the little plane and blot it from the sky.

Further off near the terminal, a herd of project team members stampede from one boarding ramp to another as frantic PMs beckon them to board. Each team member has tickets for several flights and the subject matter experts have dozens. The confusion comes from the fact that the departure and arrival times for every flight are stamped "As soon as possible" in big red letters.

"Hard to accomplish much this way isn't it?" you ask.

The controller finishes printing another 200 pages of data and chortles, "Each year, we plan projects that require twice the resources we have. All of them are #1 priorities. As a result, we actually achieve 60% of what we could have because the other 40% of the resources are wasted on projects that never should have started or never finish."

"Are the project managers that bad?"

"Well, that's what people say every time one of these project flights crashes but most of our PMs are pretty good. It didn't used to be this way. Good project managers used to be consistently successful. But now there are so many projects and so many people on multiple projects that even the best PMs regularly crash because there is no flight control."

"I Can't Change The Organization, Is Skydiving The Answer?"

The chaos above is typical of organizations in the third stage of PM evolution (lots of projects, no PM processes). When the project failure rate gets high enough, executives will act and the organization's processes will improve. We'll come back to that, but in the meantime, what can a PM do?

First, we can give the user/client a small achievement-driven project plan that focuses on their measured business results, quantifies performance expectations and includes work estimates. Such a plan lets them exercise strategic control over the project as opposed to the two options they are accustomed to; micro-managing the PM and team or having no control at all. These small achievement-driven plans take more thinking but they let the executive make strategic decisions during planning and assess progress quantitatively. Despite the lack of organizational PM processes this approach can help us retain executive level interest and may even break the "padded estimate — arbitrary cut" spiral. Best of all, we can exercise better change control because we can quantify the trade-offs in a change request.



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The foregoing also lets us create a less insane world for our project team. Our assignments are accountabilities for end results; not "to do" lists. We give people an opportunity to negotiate the hours of work required to deliver that end result. Team members have a clear understanding of their expected results and how those results will be measured. The PM manages the team's commitments to results and the work required to deliver them.

In this third stage of project management evolution, PMs have little authority over "borrowed" resources. But a little bit of assignment and reward authority is better than none. As an example, we can try and gain just a bit more authority by asking for it for critical path assignments. We may not get the authority we need but highlighting poor authority/accountability relationships as a risk factor and regularly requesting authority can raise the profile of the whole PM authority issue.

Becoming a Project-based Organization

The project-based organization (PbO) is different and few organizations begin the difficult change process until project failure rates and dissatisfied users/clients force the issue. The transition requires many difficult organizational changes. First, the importance of the departmental structure and reporting lines is diminished and people "belong" to both projects as well as their home departments. That sounds reasonable but the conversion from a strict hierarchy of units, departments and divisions is no easy task. Managers resist any reduction in their authority over the people in their departments. But in organizations, or parts of organizations, where the main business is successfully completing projects, the authority of line managers must be diminished to make room for the authority that cross-functional project managers need to be successful.

Second, in the project-based organization prioritization of projects and allocation of resources does not take place in a fantasyland where the rules of mathematics and common sense are suspended. Decision-makers do not kid themselves that 99.7 percent of the projects can be priority #1. Nor do they kid themselves that an organization with 400 people available for project work can have projects requiring 800 people's work. Instead, decision-makers meet weekly to evaluate the intake of new projects, revise priorities and then adjust resource allocations. These sessions are not pleasant because each decision-maker has users or clients whom they think should get first priority. Prioritization and allocation become a "zero sum" game. As an example, if a new project comes along that requires 800 hours of work and executives want it in priority tier #1. The first thing they have to do is "make room" for the new project by lowering the priority of one or more projects currently in tier #1 that are consuming 800 hours of our resources.

This process sounds so logical that we may wonder why decision-makers don't routinely do it. The answer is that making these decisions triggers necessary

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conflict and requires consistent information on the business-relevant outcome of all projects. If decision-makers avoid this conflict by not setting priorities or not restricting their own ability to launch projects, PMs and their team members are forced to sort through the mess. These PBO processes also require a consistent and scalable PM methodology so that all project plans provide decision-making data.

Take a look at our Enterprise Project Management section for guidance on the organizational processes and at our scalable ADPM methodology which is included in our textbooks, distance learning courses and in-person seminars.

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