PROJECT MANAGEMENT – Some home truths (3)

I could not help smiling this week when a major project success story made the headlines, rather than the normal bad news stories such as Heathrow T5 and the NHS computer system costing millions and delivering little. For, in a blaze of publicity, the amazing new 6,000 seater London Olympics Velodrome was opened for business with the GB cycling team demonstrating to the world just what a fantastic facility it is. This project was delivered on time, in full, to budget (£97m), and the GB cycling team showing it off to the media is a great example of a milestone in action: a milestone being a significant **_event_** in the life of a project.

Truth Three – Work with human nature, not against it. Manage by milestones.

The real good news about this story for project sponsors and managers everywhere is that, by learning to correctly frame, set and manage by milestones, you massively increase your chances of success, and that of course means delivering on time, in full, to budget. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, without effective milestone management, failure is assured. So let's be clear on what managing by milestones means in practice.

First of all, rather than fight it, work with human nature. When there is a set, immovable time for something to occur, it focuses hearts and minds and galvanises people into action. Who misses that plane they have to catch to go on a family holiday, or that final exam, or their driving test, and which country has ever missed being ready for the opening ceremony when hosting the Olympic Games? Global TV

schedules dictate the date and time of the opening ceremony some 4 years in advance, that plane will go whether you are there or not, the examination will not wait for you to get there and nor will it be postponed because you have not studied as you know you should have!

So a milestone is something significant in relation to the project: it's an event, when something meaningful occurs, not a task. Take the Channel Tunnel project some years ago, which had a milestone of "When the French and British engineers have shaken hands through the ends of their tunnel walls". Obviously a massive amount of work had to be completed for that significant event to happen.

Milestones also prevent the common mistake of focusing on the goal of the project alone. The goal, of course, can often feel a long way away and this engenders "it will all come good somehow" thinking, especially if it is a vague goal that is open to interpretation or is considered something that could be late if need be. You actually need to plan the journey by being clear about the milestones, those significant events along the way that must be met at specific dates if the end point is to be reached.

So, as you need to begin with the end clearly in mind, make sure you do so with a robust compelling statement of the real goal of the project, one that is crafted, agreed and ratified by the project team and sponsor.

With the goal defined, the project team can then create its milestone plan by brainstorming backwards, debating and agreeing the project milestones along the way. In doing so, each milestone is, and must be treated as being, of equal significance to the goal. The

project team needs to understand, emotionally as well as intellectually, that unless you meet each milestone on or before its due date, the project will be under threat and the final 'destination milestone' will not be reached in time. And, being significant events, these should be limited in number, typically 6 – 8 and up to 15 maximum for the largest projects.

Setting milestones together as a project team not only increases real buy-in and understanding, it also helps prevent projects from falling prey to the "activity disease". This is where the project just gets lost in a sea of detail, created using a raft of unchallenged assumptions, with no clear milestones in sight! This disease can often be seen when someone (and it is usually just one person!) is given the job of planning the project and sits at a PC creating a detailed plan, using software planning tools that few have access to, and attempts to predict every activity in the entire project. No wonder such plans are fundamentally flawed and forever being ignored and updated!

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A useful way of creating a Milestone Plan is to get people to imagine that the project has succeeded and to make that visualisation of success as real as possible, then get people to imagine what needs to have happened, by when, for that to come true. Each milestone should also be described in the past tense, i.e. 'When we have... (achieved, opened, held, made, etc)…' just as, when driving along a road, you know you have reached a milestone when you have just gone past it.

It's also important that each milestone has a set, real date and not end of Q1 or 31 December, when no one is working. Milestones should also occur regularly throughout the project and, when achieved, they should be at least recognised and preferably celebrated. There is a school of thought that says a project should have a milestone every 4 to 6 weeks, not only to make sure that people are focused and to maintain drive and momentum, but to help people feel good about themselves and enjoy being successful.

In addition to a set date, each milestone should also have an individual owner, someone who is

accountable for its delivery, and the project should attempt wherever possible to share the load amongst all the members of the team. What's great about this is that each milestone owner has to think as a project leader for their milestone, recognise the real dependencies between their milestone and that of others, and team working tends to improve all by itself as a result.

And yes, for those who are reading this and wondering where the detailed activity planning fits in, this happens **after** the milestone plan is set. The idea is to activity-schedule the near term (3 months) only, as this is the only part of the future we can realistically hope to predict with any degree of accuracy. It makes me chortle when I see detailed plans stating activities that are 6 to 9 months into the future. The only thing you can be certain about at the time these plans are developed, is, that whatever the task written in the plan, it will NOT be being done on that date! Such detailed activity plans create a mirage of control.

In Milestone Planning the logic is different. Get the 'events' locked into real dates and then work on the activities on a rolling 3-months basis. The task then becomes how can we achieve what we have to achieve in the time allowed. This stimulates creativity, passion and engagement rather than listing all the things we believe we have to do, looking at the date and inevitably concluding we should have started weeks ago!

Lastly, managing by milestones also makes it so much easier and more effective to monitor and report progress, and we will look more closely at the ongoing management of a project in the next Sense from Sensei article in April.

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