Project Management & Change Management
Inseparable Siblings or Merely Kissing Cousins?

The "Fit" between Project Management & Change Management

Most people would agree that project management and change management are closely related. But how closely related are they? Are they inseparable siblings or merely kissing cousins? If you were to ask me about the relationship or connection between project management and change management, I might say there is none. They are two distinct practices and disciplines, each with its own body of knowledge, standards and best practices. On the other hand, I might also say they are one and the same; that is, project management is change management and vice versa. How is it that I can hold these apparently opposite views? It's easy. Think of the two as facets on a gem. They have their distinct and discernible shapes, sizes and edges or boundaries yet they are both part of a larger whole. Project management and change management are also parts of a larger whole known as "management" – the art, science and skill of getting things done through people.

Project Management

The first thing to know about project management is that it is a bounded piece of work, not an ongoing, continuing process. It has due dates and deliverables. It has an end and a beginning. It can be large and lengthy or small and short. The project team can consist of a few people or a cast of dozens. Most important, whatever the work might be that constitutes a project, it entails changing things. Something will be different once the project is completed. An existing process will be improved or an entirely new process will be in place. A new system will be rolled out. People will be trained. A building will be erected. A plant will be constructed or a new line installed. Two companies will become one. At the heart of all projects is some kind of change.

Change Management

The first thing to know about change management is that it must be built in not bolted on, especially not bolted on as an afterthought. Change management must be an integral part of just about everything you do and not some special undertaking reserved for rare situations bearing the label "change." As just one illustration consider the oft-cited notion of "managing resistance to change." If you find yourself managing resistance to the changes that mark your project you are already one step behind. The goal is to head off resistance, to exploit it, to embrace it, to make use of it, not manage it once it has cropped up. You do that by embracing those who are likely to resist, those who question the wisdom of what is being proposed and by working hard to understand their reasons and reasoning. Chances are they know something you don't, and chances are that something is important to the success of your endeavor.

Lessons Learned the Hard Way

I've been in the change management and project management business for many years. Many of my consulting engagements also qualify as projects and many of them have involved projects ranging from developing the training needed to support the roll out of a new computer-based claims processing system to developing a computer-based system for issuing and managing an investment-based financial services product. Along the way I've led, managed and been part of projects that created or developed

job aids, workstations, process flows, computer systems, manuals, novel approaches to selling, financial analysis tools and a host of other interventions aimed at improving individual, group, process and organizational performance.

Here's something that might surprise you. Not once in the more than 40 years I've been doing this kind of work have I made use of any project management software. The truth be known, project management isn't about software or even the project management process as outlined in countless articles and texts. Project management – and change management – are about people and about working with them to make things happen. Some thoughts about how you do that are next.

Insights into Making Things Happen

- **Clarity Emerges and Evolves**. Only on rare occasions are expectations, requirements, deliverables and desired results crystal-clear at the outset. It has been my experience that clarity emerges and evolves in the course of moving forward. The desired results change, the timeline changes, deliverables change and schedules and due dates change. So don't expect things to be perfectly clear at the beginning of an effort. Part of the effort – part of managing a project – involves managing expectations and working to clarify them – and to change and update them as new information and insights become available.

- **Nothing Ever Goes According to Plan**. If we could predict the future none of us would be working for a living. We'd be in a casino or at the racetrack – and then only long enough to accumulate a fortune. The fact that we can't predict the future means there will always be unforeseen events and circumstances, surprises that upset and even derail our plans and so it's back to the drawing board to see what needs to be done. Think of your project plan as your best guess at the current time as to how to proceed and not as a prescription carved in stone to be blindly followed. Flexibility and resilience are key qualities of project managers and leaders.

- **On Time, On Budget is a Myth**. In light of the preceding comments, consider the fabled goal of management: "On time, On budget." Much ado is made about bringing in projects on time and on budget. Sometimes that happens. More often than not it doesn't. When it does happen that is usually the mark of a project where budgets and schedules have been modified and updated so as to keep up with emerging clarity and unfolding circumstances. The notion that initial schedules and budgets can be met is a myth. Remember: Clarity emerges and you can't predict the future.

- **Give to Get**. *Practice the Principle of Reciprocity*. This is perhaps the most important point of all. Projects of any size and significance usually involve and rely on the contributions of many people. This requires the three C's of human endeavor: communication, cooperation and collaboration. Information – all information – must be shared. Make it a point to share information with the other people working on the project and they will share with you. Cooperation and collaboration hinge on mutual influence. You acquire influence over others as a result of being influenced by them. You get power by giving it. Successful projects are marked by free-flowing, continuous communication, by unstinting cooperation and by genuine collaboration.

- **Wide Open and Transparent**. In keeping with the above, the climate or culture of a given project must be wide open and transparent. Anyone can go anywhere and talk to anyone about anything. Failure to do that means that communication will become circumscribed and that means that somewhere along the line someone will fail to know what they should know and the project will suffer.

- **Informal vs Formal**. As the items above suggest, the overall approach to a project should be informal rather than formal. The project is an instance of collective, human endeavor, a group of people working together to make something happen. They all have something important to contribute or they wouldn't (or at least shouldn't) be part of the project. The focus needs to be on defining and eliciting those key contributions, not on roles, reporting relationships and position in the pecking order. As one instance of how to do this, rely on short-interval, informal updates instead of lengthy, formal progress reports.

- **Balance Leadership & Management**. Most projects are over-managed and under-led. Ditto for most bolted-on change management initiatives. Don't confuse managing a project with leading it, and don't confuse the project manager with the project leader. If you're lucky you can get both in one person; if not you will need two people. If you're struggling with the difference, consider this: management (and managers) focus on the work; leadership (and leaders) focus on the mission and the people who must accomplish it.

- **Make Use of Prototypes**. Many of the points touched on above were addressed in a paper I wrote about a project that focused on developing a PC-based insurance policy issuance and management system. It was titled "Prototyping: Systems Development in Record Time." It was a remarkable project and it is a story about project management and change management that is well worth telling. The paper was published in the *Journal of Systems Management* and it is available on the web at: http://www.nickols.us/prototyping.pdf. It will shed additional light on the points above and make a few additional points as well.

Some people will find some of the points made above to be jarring, even outrageous, and clearly at odds with their own views. So, allow me to lay out some of what is behind those points.

Behind those Thoughts . . .

One of the more seminal articles if not the most seminal article about project management was written by Paul Gaddis and published in the May-June 1959 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. It was titled simply enough "The Project Manager," and much of it is as timely as when it was first written.[1] However, there have been many changes in the world of work and working since Gaddis published that seminal piece. Consider the brief list that follows:

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[1] Gaddis' article is available on my web site with permission of the *Harvard Business Review*. It can be found at this link: https://www.nickols.us/ThePM.pdf

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- The economy has moved from regional and national to international and now global, introducing a host of complexities not faced on a widespread basis in Gaddis' time.
- The basis of most work has shifted from materials to information, a shift that was underway in Gaddis' day but hadn't yet reached the extent it now presents.
- Correspondingly, the locus of worker activity has shifted from interacting mainly with materials to interacting with information, typically obtained through interactions with other people. Most workers are now information processors, not materials processors.
- Perhaps most important, the activity of working itself has shifted from prefigured or designed in advance "canned routines" to actions configured in response to the varying and changing circumstances at hand. The instability that was just emerging in Gaddis' time is now rampant and widespread.

The fluidity, complexity and uncertainty of the world of work and working that confronts many people today, especially those involved in project work, means that managing projects is itself a fluid, complex and uncertain task. Analyses must be done on the fly; sudden changes in circumstances, goals, funding and the like must be accommodated quickly; trade-offs among results, budgets and schedules are an ongoing activity; and project managers do well to stay on top of things let alone pretend they have them all under control. Imagine driving a car at high speed with the steering wheel, brakes and gas pedal working only part of the time and in unpredictable combinations. That is the reality of many projects.

In Closing . . .

In closing let me reinforce the point I made at the outset: Change management must be an integral part of project management, not something that you do in addition. Separating the two is sure to lead down an unproductive path. Are there concepts, principles, methods, tool and techniques that are clearly viewed as part of the body of knowledge associated with change management? Yes there are and if you are to integrate change management with project management you must familiarize yourself with these. Doing so will enrich and expand your prowess as a project leader, manager and member. In the final analysis, change management is everyone's job.

Lastly, going back to the somewhat tongue-in-cheek question in the subtitle of this paper, it should be obvious that I view project management and change management as inseparable siblings.

About the Author

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