

Managing Projects in trying times

Dennis Comninos

The world is being buffeted by rapidly shifting circumstances brought about by the global economic situation. Although temporarily isolated from the gloomy situation of our trading partners, South Africa cannot remain “lagered” indefinitely; sooner rather than later we will be affected by the global economic turmoil. But is it all doom and gloom out there or are there opportunities that we are just not seeing? Does the current situation warrant pessimism or optimism?

In contemplating these issues, we should bear in mind what Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, once said; *“when one door closes another door opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the ones which open for us”*. As a business-focused Project Manager, I have to agree with Alexander Graham Bell. Now is the time for bold thinking and brave initiatives rather than thinking about what was. Now is the time to initiate projects rather than to cut back on or delay projects.

Why do I say this? Business in these trying times (and in fact continuously) is all about adaptation. Adaptation means changes to the way we do things and change requires that we carry out one-time unique events i.e. projects. If we do not adapt or change, our businesses will stagnate and decline. Using the same logic, if we curtail projects we will not adapt or change.

Even in trying times we still have to complete certain existing projects and initiate new ones. In many cases however, we have to now carry this out and meet our goals with radically different budgets, staffing, and business requirements than we had when we started. When money is flowing, resources are abundant, and time is on your side, almost anyone can achieve project success. But in these times, when money is scarce and resources are precious, and time is definitely the enemy it's the time for innovative Project Managers to show their mettle and prove their capability to their organisations.

Shrewd project managers know there are a variety of strategies they can use to adapt and thrive. A clear understanding of project deliverables and solid project plans based on business value helps us figure out where we're going. Rethinking our project methodologies and goals can help us figure out how to get there and reviews of our staffing and status show us what we need to change and who can help us change it. The message is clear for 2009; pick the right projects, prioritise better, do more with much less, focus on business value, and deploy lean but effective project teams.

What then should we be doing? In short, at least the following;

- Become more proactive - anticipate that things will be changing. Don't assume that 'it's not going to happen here' - the reality is we are already feeling the impact and we may get hit harder still and good Project Managers should be making plans for the changes now.
- Formulate more rigorous business cases. In addition to more accurate cost-benefit analyses and project metrics, include realistic and more scientific business value and risk analyses.

- Perform more vigorous prioritisation of projects. Make more use of risk and benefit/business value as decision factors – be more objective and less subjective in our approach.
- Optimise resources – this is not just about financial resources but about people as well. Pick the right team based on individuals' capabilities or talents and not just on competency and empower them with the right tools and knowledge.
- Focus more on value creation than deliverables. This requires a move away from the traditional project management trade-off triangle of Time, Cost and Quality with its focus on project deliveries to a trade-off quad of Time, Cost, Quality and Benefit, which focuses on the delivery of business value.
- Adopt an Agile approach to projects. Plan using a business objective-focused rather than activity-based project management approach. Consider planning to deliver incremental value rather than just completing phases and activities.

And finally, stay positive! Consider what Winston Churchill had to say about bad times *“An optimist sees an opportunity in every calamity; a pessimist sees a calamity in every opportunity”*.

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