

MANAGING PATHOLOGY PROJECTS FOR SUCCESS

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A successful project is a masterpiece of co-ordinated effort. It is about mastering paradox and managing trade-offs, activities that require a particular mindset, skillset and attitude.

We are all good at discovering, in hindsight, why projects go wrong. We're less adept at preventing them from going wrong in the future. Organizations that have experienced failure usually react by establishing tighter controls and procedures that require closer 'adherence to standards' and stricter financial guidelines. Although important, they rarely contribute to success.

For many years, senior pathology managers and clinicians have successfully implemented change within their environments. Why is it that those abilities and skills are not enough? In the last two decades, the number of laboratories and tests has been proliferating and emerging, while costs were not deemed a *major* factor. Most labs were concerned with new technology, new tests, assay quality and marketshare. During the current decade, there is focus on cost containment, mostly a government driven requirement, and the advent of 'new technology capabilities'. This means generating economies of scale through rationalization, consolidation, standardization, and automation. The landscape of pathology has changed and will continue to change.

We live in uncertain times. Governance is changing. Mergers, acquisitions, the formation of service hubs and joint venture relationships are being formed. Technology is being commercialized faster than we can implement. In particular, the introduction of system to system transfer of data, the Internet and expert decision tools all add to the complexity. With the introduction of new technologies and new governance comes the building of 'Greenfield sites', process re-design, and re-structuring. All of this means '**do more with less**'. These changes are complex and often create organizational chaos. Outcomes are now measured with a requirement for accountability and responsibility.

Project management is an 'art', an 'attitude' and a 'modus operandi' that responds easily to the above issues. It is a one-time activity, with a well-defined set of desired end results. It is about a series of interdependent tasks that require a coordinated approach with control elements that include time, precedence, cost and performance. The complexities and multidisciplinary aspects of projects require that many parts be put together to meet the prime objectives. They are:

- Quality: meeting customer expectations
- Time: meeting schedule requirements
- Cost: time and cost of people, capital and overhead

When a project is formed, a system has been created. The project system, regardless of its size, intent or complexity is comprised of people, material resources, information, time and money. The system must be managed to be successful. The systems approach to project management is predicated on four key assumptions.

REALITY	Project planning must reflect the realities of both the tasks and the participants
TEAMWORK	No individual can be successful without support from other participants
OWNERSHIP	Plans are not successful, People are!
ADAPTABILITY	The systems approach establishes visible relationships between activities, so that rapid identification of impact can be determined should changes be needed

EIGHT STEPS TO PROJECT MANAGEMENT ARE:

1 DEVELOP PROJECT CHARTER

Why? To ensure everyone is focused on the same outcome

How?

- Identify stakeholders
- Identify requirements
- Determine project scope and set goals
- Determine criteria for a successful project
- Identify key assumptions and constraints
- Identify barriers to success

2 SELECT PLAYERS

Why? To assure that the right players are involved at the right time performing the right activities

How?

- Identify necessary functions to achieve the outcome
- Identify right players with the right skills and attitude
- Prepare the project structure

3 IDENTIFY ACTIONS REQUIRED

Why? To assure that all necessary tasks and activities are completed on time and each participant knows their role

How?

- Identify all actions
- Develop team mandate, goals and deliverables
- Develop Gantt/Milestone charts

4 IDENTIFY CRITICAL SUPPLIER RELATIONSHI

Why? To assure they key transactions between project teams are successfully managed both inside and outside the organization.

How?

- Identify *critical* steps or activities
- Identify key suppliers

5 DEVELOP PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Why? To assure that key activities are being completed successfully and are being monitored in real-time

How?

- Set performance indicators
- Set-up tracking systems

6 DEVELOP MONIOTRING AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

Why? To assure that project players as well as customers get accurate information when needed

How?

- Develop a formal communication network
- Develop an informal communication network
- Develop a project review format
- Design a System Change Review Process

7 MANAGE RISKS

Why? To minimize the likelihood that unexpected problems will cause project failure. Removing problems before they occur saves time and money.

How?

- Identify areas of significant risk
- Develop preventative & contingent scenarios

8 DEVELOP PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Why? To assure successful individual and team performance so that good performance can be facilitated and reinforced

The selection of a Project Manager is a crucial element to success. Firstly they are managers, and while some understanding of the technology is useful, it is not the vital ingredient. They must be competent, experienced people; especially at the business and project management levels so that they can act as a clearing house for solving problems and ensuring follow-up.

The role of paradox is important. Tom Peters sees this as:

- Seeing both the big picture and the small detail
- Holding autocrat/delegator roles dependent on the circumstances
- Handling complexity while keeping the rules simple
- Providing inspirational leadership one moment and detailed management planning the next

The key competencies required in a Project Manager are planning and organizing, managing risk, team building, managing relationships, managing change and managing information and results. Some of the key skills include persuasion, systems thinking, flexibility, ability to deal with organizational politics, presenting and obtaining trade-offs, rigorous planning and review, focusing on results, intolerance of delays and the ability to 'COMMUNICATE' at all levels in the organization.

Most organizations will tell you they have a shortage of competent project managers and they are also scarce in the market. More could be done to train project managers by selecting people with many of the skills required and providing an experienced mentor, preferably from outside the organization, to provide on-the-job support and training. This type of support comes at a cost but the alternative of outsourcing rarely builds up internal capability.

Conclusion

Project Management allows for more organizational flexibility, a feature that we are all seeking. It enables organizations to deliver complex projects on time, on budget which meet customer expectations and specifications. A supportive and competent project sponsor (individual or a group), who exhibit similar traits to those listed for the Project Manager, will significantly enhance chances of success. The acquisition or development of these skill sets within an organization allows personal opportunity for growth and partnership.

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