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Project Management Certification as a Communication and Process Toolset

A case study for the CAPM® Certification Course

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Introduction

XZY Management Consulting firm has been in business for over 30 years, providing project management services to companies around the world. It has a billion-dollar project portfolio with hundreds of projects. It needs to decrease time-to-market in response to competitive pressures and expanding product line. It sets aggressive goals to reduce average project duration by approximately 50% and improve internal customer satisfaction by 25% over a three-year period.

The organizational focus had been to leverage best practices and industry standards for projects, ensuring that the services provided to clients were valuable and useful. However, as the organization has grown and evolved, project managers have all adopted a very personal style to managing projects.

Some project managers follow the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK), while others rely more on their personal extensive experience and have created many unique approaches to working with clients and various initiatives within their chosen industry. Project Managers leverage various approaches to managing their projects, report performance metrics based on the needs of their clients, and manage performance based on hours, dollars, or indexes depending on their personal preference, for example:

Individual projects have multiple approaches to managing scope with some project managers leveraging change requests; others respond to requests on a one-off basis.

In some cases, project efforts leverage formalized risk management while others use a less formal approach to identifying and overcoming obstacles.

Lessons learned are collected and maintained by individual project managers and not as an organization with PMs having their own personal set.

Recent customer surveys, client retention rates, and overall project performance have been dropping, leaving the firm with the need to do something to improve professionalism and success factors across all initiatives.

Challenges

Most project managers have been with the firm for 10 or more years, with only a small fraction joining recently. Based on varied client needs, the industries that projects were completed for range from computer infrastructure to business process improvement and transformational change. Therefore, project managers were grouped into functional knowledge areas and often did not work with counterparts in other industries.

With the varied background of team members and the diversity of industries, the organization adopted an internal "language" for dealing with project deliverables and reports. This internal reference was not documented and was based more on interaction and on-the-job learning. New project managers faced tremendous challenges in understanding the terminology and acronyms used by the tenured staff members.

In addition, clients would often pick their "favorite" project managers to work with insisting that other PMs did things differently or incorrectly and didn't understand the uniqueness of their projects.

Finally, the Executive Leadership team was focused on billable time and profits, leaving little time or dollars to be spent on personal growth, career education, or certifications for team members. Instead of investing in training, the organization suffered a very high level of turnover for project managers who "did not get it" or were unable to adapt to the rigid undocumented processes employed. A varied set of expertise and skills are a norm at the firm.

John was appointed the new Sr. Program Manager and was assigned a high-profile complex software development program consisting of three projects that were all running behind schedule, over budget, and with rising concerns from the

stakeholder community. John's task was to turn the program around before the client canceled the entire contract.

To better understand the issues, John analyzed each project by looking at schedules, budget, work performance, and quality reports and interviewing the project managers. The result:

Project A
The project had been plagued with constant changes from the stakeholder community impacting the scope of the effort, schedules, cost, and quality. Stakeholders continued to find new features and individually insisted that they needed to be added for the project to be successful. The project manager was frustrated with the stakeholder requests and was consistently being chastised for missing deliverables and deadlines.

Project B
Unexpected issues were an ongoing concern for the effort. While the project was based on new technology, the team was comprised of cutting-edge technical staff. The team was able to overcome each obstacle that slowed the project. Unfortunately, the plans and schedule had gone out the window. Quality was struggling to keep up with the changes, and the stakeholder community was frustrated and confused as to how the project would meet the requirements and when to plan for the actual project completion.

Project C
Throughout the project lifecycle, stakeholders had popped in and out of team meetings. At times, they contributed vital information on regulations, customer needs, and usability features, while at others, they were completely detached from the effort and silent to requests for material review or project status meetings. In addition, the team was consistently restating information in each meeting. Everything from requirements to proposed solutions, business cases, and risks seemed to be new information and warranted rehashing the topics in great depth and detail. Overall, the project was able to move through the execution successfully but was held up at every phase gate and decision point.

Solution

Recognizing the disparity in knowledge, standards, and processes and frustrated with inconsistencies on the projects in his program, John realized that each project was being managed differently with partial project management processes being implemented. While the Project Managers had proven track records of success, they were frustrated with their client and none were confident of success for their efforts.

John identified the need for a common framework across all managers. As a certified Program Management Professional (PgMP) from the Project Management Institute (PMI), the program manager decided to implement project management standards and certifications for his project managers.

Each project manager was provided with a copy of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK) and signed up for a training course on the materials. Since they all had many years of project management experience and were successful in past efforts, John was not concerned about their ability to understand or grasp the concepts. Therefore, each manager was challenged with learning, attending the course, and passing a certification exam for Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM).

Approach

After completing their required training and in preparation for their exam, project managers were tasked with identifying areas of inconsistency between their projects and the standards. A gap analysis on each project identified issues with terminology, standards, common practices, and industry standards where their individual management choices had either missed knowledge areas or had incompletely addressed the knowledge area as it related to the project.

Project A

The Project Manager for Project A quickly recognized that the changes to requirements and scope could be addressed with improved Scope Management processes. Since the project was already underway, the Project Manager recognized that they had to fast track the implementation and move into a more effective execution process.

The Project Manager initially developed a scope statement based on the requirements that had been previously identified and the requests received from stakeholders. She brought her team together and brainstormed the scope, ensuring that the boundaries for scope were clearly identified, including the current work and requested requirements. From this scope statement, she leveraged the project schedule previously developed and created a work breakdown structure.

Initially, the WBS consisted solely of the work encompassed in the schedule, but in the next review, the team took the scope statement, identified the gaps in tasks previously identified, and created a more extensive and complete WBS that encapsulated all the work necessary to achieve the project.

The project schedule was updated with the newly identified tasks, and each work package was adjusted on the timeline to improve efficiency and ensure that predecessor tasks were complete prior to undertaking the subsequent efforts.

Next, the Project Manager created a Change Management process that required a formalized Change Request and identified the steps necessary to evaluate change, determine project impact, and follow an approval process with a Change Control Board of stakeholders. The Change Requests included impact analysis and changes to scope/schedule/cost prior to review and approval by the Change Control Board.

While the project did not meet its initial schedules, budget, or scope through the implementation of Scope Management, it soon operated with constrained Change Requests and began to meet every deliverable schedule.

Project B

As the Project Manager for Project B went through the training and read the materials, he took immediate notice of the formalized Risk Management knowledge area. Throughout the training course he recognized the value of Risk Management exercises for his efforts and could see how, while counterintuitive to his need to push the project through to completion, stepping back with the team to do brainstorming exercises could absolutely assist in recognizing issues before they were encountered.

As soon as he returned from his training course, he called his team together to start brainstorming on everything that could go wrong and strategies to overcome any potential risk. Going through this process, the team was able to identify a huge number of hurdles. Some would have completely derailed the effort.

The initial Risk Identification process was tremendously useful. The project benefited from regular, ongoing identification, qualification, and planning sessions. The sessions enabled them to recognize potential future issues and devise approaches to resolve them.

The project benefited from the Risk Management process throughout the lifecycle, but more importantly, they were able to identify enterprise and program level risks which were raised to the Program Manager who leveraged these issues to avoid pitfalls on other efforts.

Project C

When the Project Manager for Project C heard about the new methodology, he ridiculed the thought that some book would provide the solution to his issues. His issues weren't process related, they were personality and power struggle issues with stakeholders who just involved themselves when convenient and torpedoed the project. No methodology would solve that.

However, after doing some of the course case studies, reading the materials, and working through exercises, he suddenly realized that his issue was related to Stakeholder Engagement and Management as well as Communication.

First, the stakeholder engagement was not being managed effectively. When stakeholders dropped out of the project participation, they were left alone and not encouraged to rejoin or participate. As a matter of fact, many seemed to feel that they were not necessary during particular project stages and, with busy schedules, reprioritized their time.

Project Manager C began actively managing participation by documenting attendance, noticing who was and wasn't participating, reaching out to various stakeholders to actively solicit their interaction, and most importantly contacting stakeholders prior to meetings and decision points to ensure they were aware of the importance of their attendance/participation. Project Manager C also was involved in identifying the topics and issues for discussions and acknowledging stakeholders when they did participate.

Secondly, the project manager recognized that the information and the mechanisms for communication were not effective. Long, detailed reports were not being read or sent out on a monthly basis. In addition, the frequency of various communications was not in line with the stakeholder needs. He developed a Communication Plan that identified which information would be provided, when, and through what mechanisms. Then he offered this information to stakeholders and allowed them to choose their level of interaction.

At times, stakeholders selected a lower level of participation than that the project manager felt was appropriate based on their interests and influence. In those cases, he sat down with the stakeholders to validate their choices, inform them of the value they brought to the effort, and at times tailored the communications to meet their specific needs.

At the end of this transition, long reports were set aside in preference of bullet point documents that quickly provided status, issues, risks, and decision points. Email was a preferred method of communication and meetings were limited to crucial status and decision-making discussions. Stakeholders were encouraged to participate, monitored, and personally followed up with.

Very quickly, changes were limited and decisions were made up-front on project efforts. There were fewer drive-by/drop-ins, and stakeholders increased their overall satisfaction with their knowledge and level of involvement and decreased changes.

John, the Program Manager of the effort, mentored and advised project managers. However, the program itself reaped immediate benefits with program and enterprise level risks being raised sooner, greater overall participation, increased communication, and better scope management. Suddenly, the negative numbers for cost, schedule, and quality were turning around and projects were achieving their objectives in a timely, efficient, and effective manner. Customer satisfaction surveys indicated greater confidence in project efforts, and complaints reduced dramatically.

Final Outcome

The executives at XYZ quickly noticed how John's program was outperforming the others in the portfolio and how his projects had turned around performance and increased customer satisfaction. John was brought to the Executive Leadership Team to explain his success.

John explained that while his managers were very skilled and experienced in project management, simple things were becoming systemic issues. In addition, the project managers struggled to communicate with one another both because of their internal struggles but also because of a lack of consistent terminology. The introduction of a framework of consistent best practice, taken across all industries, facilitated increased overall performance and provided success factors for individual efforts.

John explained that Project Management Institute had developed standards from project managers around the world and across industries. The Body of Knowledge had been developed based on consistent and repeated success factors from project managers and was a relatively open standard that constantly evolved based on personal experience of project managers around the world.

He pointed out that requiring a passing certification test ensured that his managers truly invested themselves in the learning process instead of just attending the course. This ensured that managers had read all the material, attended courses, and discussed their findings with John as their mentor. Pointing out that project managers had complete flexibility over their project, he identified how they had found critical areas of concern, developed tailored processes to address, and customized their approach. At the same time, John showed how managers maintained their own autonomy and made choices for how they would address issues based on their own experience and expertise.

The Executive team, impressed with the rapid improvements, quickly mandated the approach be undertaken across all organizational projects and programs. While an investment in time and energy, they quickly reaped the benefits turning around their critical failures and achieving the first truly successful project deliveries in a number of years. Customer satisfaction numbers skyrocketed and XYZ returned to its position as the market leader.

Lessons Learned

Process improvement does not have to be an external function nor is there any requirement that it be extensive. In this case study, managers were presented with a framework for project success but were not required to implement a blanket policy. Instead, they were presented with the opportunity to learn, and while going through that process, self-identify issues within their current efforts. This self-identification process can be extremely powerful as the individual is not pressured from outside influences, instead they can identify their own concept of critical issues and look for ways of mitigating the impact.

While efforts can be all-consuming in the challenges faced, often continuing to make the same mistakes simply produces the same results and with no improvements. Taking a step back from the effort to see the challenges from a different perspective can be incredibly valuable.

Similar to many organizations today, XYZ had not found a need to invest in training in the past. However, competition, market shifts, technical changes, cultural transitions all had a tremendous impact on the business model. To turn the company back around, they needed to adapt a new approach that would change the overall way they did business without negatively impacting their key success factors.

At times, the investment in people, especially when focused, can have such tremendous results that it seems surprising it was not undertaken sooner. However, there are so many different technologies, management approaches, leadership styles, and knowledge areas that simply training your people, as an open-ended approach, may not have the desired impact. Instead, John could clearly identify a critical area of knowledge and focus his team on investing their efforts in expanding that knowledge area.