

IMPROVEMENT SKILLS CONSULTING LTD.

“Simply, improvement...”



What makes an effective
Project Office?

What makes an effective Project Office?

“Beware the Project Police!”

Organising to manage projects

I've had conversations with several clients and potential clients about the capability of their organisations to manage projects and programmes successfully. The discussions have not been so much about how to 'run' projects and programmes, but more about their overall organisation and management.

Some of the organisations I've spoken with have in-house 'Project Management Offices' (PMOs) and others are thinking about setting up such an organisation. Having seen too many examples of PMOs that are viewed by their host organisations as little more than the 'project police', I reflected on what it is that the really effective PMOs do.

In my experience, there are four things that an effective PMO has to do...

-  help the organisation to deliver on its 'big ticket' projects
-  track and communicate progress with current projects
-  enable the organisation to build its capability to run successful projects and programmes
-  continuously improve the way the organisation runs projects and programmes

The 'project police' PMOs typically claim to be doing the first, but in practice are usually seen as only doing the second. People in the organisation feel the PMO exists to get them to fill in reporting templates and to give them endless grief for not complying with the 'right' methodology.

Let's look at what an effective PMO should be doing...

Helping the organisation deliver on its big ticket projects

In practice, this is how the PMO will establish its greatest credibility. PMO staff need to work alongside Project Sponsors and Project Managers in a coaching and facilitation role. In the early stages of a project, they should help set up the project with the right approach and relevant tools. This is likely to include helping draft

the Project Initiation Document and establishing the project team so that it gets off to a flying start, with the right people. Once projects are underway, PMO staff will need to continue to coach and provide support to keep projects on track and focused on achieving their objectives. Depending on the experience and expertise of the Sponsor, Manager and Team, this role may need to be quite hands-on, but without taking ownership away. The focus of the PMO is on ensuring each project succeeds, using whatever level of intervention is most appropriate. In a 'project immature' organisation, this may mean keeping methodology to a minimum and translating 'project-speak' into plain English.

Tracking and reporting progress on current projects

As I said above, many PMOs focus too much time on reporting and end up being seen as unhelpful and obsessed with paperwork and methodology. Effective tracking and reporting needs to be scaled to the needs of the organisation.

Thinking about planning in a hierarchy of levels is really important. At the highest level, governance groups need to be able to see that project milestones and key deliverables are on track. They also need to be aware of common risks and issues across the collection of projects underway, including potential dependencies between projects. Sponsors and Managers need to be able track progress at a more detailed level. They need also to look at risks and issues within their project and the dependencies within the project. At the lowest level of detail, the Project Manager and team need to be on top of plans and progress for individual tasks. Depending on the pace and timescale for the project this may mean daily 'stand up' meetings, or weekly 1-page reports.

Enable the organisation to develop project capability

This is a role that is often neglected, or simply left to the Training Department and risks having a disconnect between the skills needed by people in the organisation and the reality of business projects.

What is absolutely clear to me is that very few people in most organisations will need to be trained in Prince2, Managing Successful Programmes, or any of the other 'formal' methodologies. Perhaps 5% of people might need these methods.

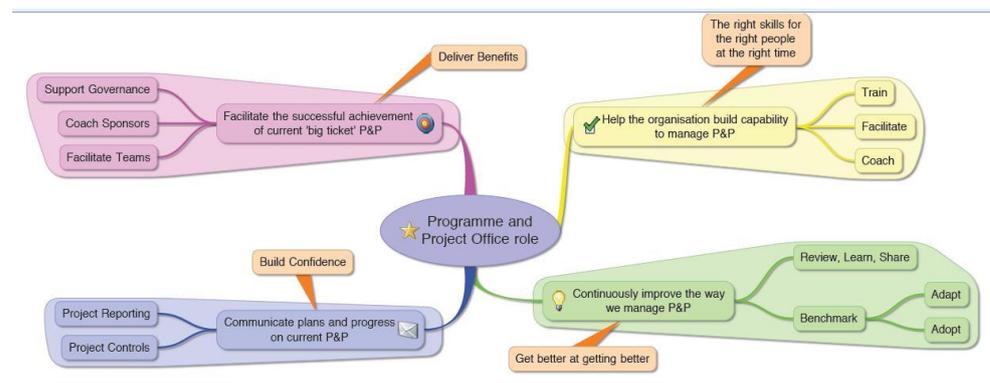
Everyone else needs some basic skills covering the stakeholder/people aspects of managing successful projects and some practical tools to set up, plan and implement/control a project. My free to download e-book talks about 'project management for real people'. The PMO may not be geared up to deliver these skills, but it should be working with the organisation's learning and development people to put these in place. This might include some training, but often the most successful skills transfer happens in a workshop type situation where people are helped to apply relevant tools to their real business projects.

Continuously improve the organisation's capability

The PMO needs to be outward looking as well as inward looking. There are plenty of different approaches 'out there' and the PMO is in the best place to identify relevant good practices that may be adapted or adopted by the organisation. They may need to bring in Agile methods to support technology projects, or process methods (e.g. Lean and Six Sigma) for performance improvement projects.

How to get started

Most readers will probably be aware of the Joseph Juran quote: 'if you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got'. If your organisation already has a Project Office do a quick assessment of how well it is doing the four things described above. If you're thinking of setting up a PMO, or about to embark on a series of projects, consider how you start off with the intention of fulfilling all four of these roles.



I have been helping organisations develop these capabilities for over 25 years. If your projects and programmes aren't on track or if your people don't have the skills to deliver successful project outcomes, have a look at some of my free Project Management White Papers and then let's have a conversation about how I can help you.

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors to manage and improve their approach to projects and programmes for nearly two decades. We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to establish an effective project management organisation and culture.

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