Chapter 5: The consequences of appointing an accidental project manager

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Chapter 5: The consequences of appointing an accidental project manager

SYNOPSIS

This chapter investigates the appointment of an accidental project manager as a sure path to project failure. The nature of accidental project management is investigated and the definition of an accidental project manager is discussed. The project management causes of project failure are investigated and the contribution of the appointment of an accidental project manager to project failure is briefly discussed. Lastly, guidelines for project management professionalism are discussed.
Chapter 5: The consequences of appointing an accidental project manager

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, the role of project management, projects and the project manager in business success were discussed. Chapter 3 discussed the selection criteria that should be followed when appointing or selecting a project manager to lead the project on hand. The challenges faced by project managers and some ways to overcome them during the life cycle of the project were discussed in Chapter 4.

In order to be successful, the project manager must have certain skills, including personal skills, communication skills, behavioural skills, technical skills and so forth. Chapter 5 discusses the appointment of an accidental project manager as a sure path to project failure and guidelines for project management professionalism.

5.2 THE NATURE OF THE ACCIDENTAL PROJECT MANAGER

Most organisations select their project managers randomly without following a proper selection process. A good example of how organisations appoint or select their project manager by accident is the story by Heerkens (2002:1) where Susan selected Brad to be a project manager because of his technical skills, but with no project management skills:
Brad picks up the phone before the second ring. It’s his boss, Susan. “Brad, I’d like you to stop by my office right after lunch today.”

Brad is not really sure why the boss is calling him into her office, which makes for a long lunch hour. He knows he’s been doing a good job lately. As a matter of fact, he knows that he’s probably the most technically capable person in the group. Brad’s mind begins to race ... Maybe it’s an award? Could it be a promotion? “No, wait,” he says to himself in a frenzy of self-doubt. “Maybe I did something I wasn’t supposed to? Or maybe I didn’t do something I should have?”

Countless positive and negative scenarios run through Brad’s overworked mind until one o’clock finally rolls around and he cautiously enters Susan’s office. “Brad, I’ve got some great news for you,” Susan begins. “Since it’s so closely related to what we do here, Project Apex has been assigned to our group.” Brad smiles without knowing why.

Susan continues, “You’re one of the best engineers I have.” Brad’s smile widens in anticipation. And then – without warning – Susan utters those fateful words. “Congratulations, Brad, I’m assigning you as the project manager for Project Apex.”

Great news? Did she say great news? “What do I know about managing projects?” Brad thinks to himself. As Brad begins to leave Susan’s office, she delivers the knockout punch.

“By the way, Brad” Susan says with a curious inflection in her voice, “I think you should be aware ... management is really going to be watching closely. There’s an awful lot resting on the success of your project.”
As Brad slips out of Susan’s office, the same two words keep ringing in his ears – “your project.”

5.2.1 The accidental project manager

The story above is exactly how most organisations appoint project managers to lead their projects. As indicated in Chapter 3, project managers, in particular, will be faced with the challenges of understanding the project management processes and techniques in order to successfully manage a project. As a result, organisations should not undermine the selection process when appointing project managers.

Every day, engineers, salespeople, technicians and countless others are thrust into the role of project manager. They are very good at what they do. In fact, they are typically the most technically knowledgeable engineers or the most successful salespeople. Now they are about to become project managers. Actually, it is probably more appropriate to refer to them by their more popular (however, informal) name – accidental project managers (Heerkens 2002:2).

Heerkens (2002:2) further provides the following definitions:

**Project**: A temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service.

**Project manager**: The person ultimately responsible for the success or failure of a project.

**Accidental project manager**: A person who is placed in the role of project manager by organisational necessity and chance, rather than by design or through choice of career path.
5.2.2 Selection of an accidental project manager

The following points were used by Susan to select Brad as a project manager for project Apex:

- done a good job lately
- probably the most technically capable person in the group
- the best engineer in the organisation.

One of the challenges project managers face in managing their projects successfully is their understanding of the project management context. The biggest problem with Brad is that he does not know how to manage a project or understand project management techniques. This is already posing a serious challenge to him to successfully manage the project. He needs to learn project management techniques while management is looking closely for success in terms of project deliverables.

5.2.3 Project management: causes of project failure

Many people become project managers by accident, like Brad in this case. Figure 5-1 explains the subset of causes of project failure. Only unsupportive top management and the appointment of the wrong project manager will further be discussed as the most important contributing factors to project failure. According to Richman (2002:3), someone assigns project managers to manage a project because of their areas of expertise, not because they have received any project management training. However, if you manage a project by accident, it will become a disaster.
Figure 5-1 Causes of project failure

Level I: Project management context

1. Inappropriate project management approach
2. Unsupportive top management

Level II: Project management system

3. Wrong project manager
4. Failure to use systems approach
5. Misuse of management techniques

Level III: Planning and control process

Conception  Definition  Execution  Operation

6. Inadequate communication
7. Non-involvement of user
8. Inadequate planning
9. Inadequate definition
10. Bad estimating
11. Incorrect scheduling/resources
12. Numerous changes
13. Inadequate control
14. Poorly planned termination

Source: Nicholas 2004:537
5.2.3.1 Selecting the wrong project manager

Most organisations use trust in a person – not ability – to select their project managers. Any change initiative by an organisation will require project management skills and understanding of the project management techniques. Thus, the project manager plays an important role in this regard.

According to Nicholas (2004:538), if the person in the role of project manager does not have the background, skills, experience, or personality to lead and manage the project:

- Project is unable to confront conflict. The project manager does not ask tough, probing questions, and cannot effectively argue for the best interests of the project;
- Project manager cannot make the adjustment from a traditional work environment to the change and uncertainty of project. The project manager lacks the ability to function effectively under short time frames and stressful situations;
- The project manager is not well rounded in technical and managerial skills. Sometimes this arises from a variation of the so called Peter Principle: putting a good technician into a managerial role about which he knows nothing i.e. Brad knew nothing about project management but was appointed the project manager for project Apex. In other cases the project manager has managerial skills, but is so preoccupied with administrative details that the project manager ignores critical technical matters. The project manager lacks the skills and charisma to command the respect of the project team.
A common mistake by organisations is the appointment of a project manager who has excellent technical skills, but weak managerial skills or training, which leads to project failure.

5.2.3.2 Unsupportive top management

Top management does not give the necessary support to the project manager in order to achieve the project goals. The top management does not:

- provide resources, responsibilities and authority to the project manager;
- support or back the project manager’s decisions in most cases;
- participate in reviewing progress and project plans; and
- make policy and procedures needed to implement project management effectively.

The top management of organisations are more concerned about turnaround strategy, but do not provide necessary project management training to successfully manage the turnaround projects. Most of the project failures are as a result of lack of support or commitment from top management.

5.3 PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALISM: GUIDELINES

In order to address the problem of project failures as the result of the project management context and project management system (see Figure 5-1), consideration should be given to project management professionals. The project management professionals will unfortunately involve the highest investment in terms
of the money that will be required. But in return, the investment will provide the project managers with the necessary knowledge the project managers would need to be successful. In addition, it will provide the project managers with credentials that have come to be expected of professional project managers.

5.3.1 Training and development

Organisations implementing project management training and development could show moderate to extreme improvement in a variety of business measures, including customer satisfaction, productivity and cost-schedule-requirements and performance.

Organisations who offer internal project management training to its employees should fully utilise the initiative. If no internal project management training is available, the organisation should investigate the external project management courses offered by external consultants. The organisation should encourage its project managers to study project management at postgraduate level. In addition, they should encourage their project managers to attain professional certification (PMP or other) as provided by recognised project management bodies around the globe. This status may encourage the remaining potential candidates to obtain the PMP certification.

5.3.2 Organisational standards

The organisation must provide standard models and procedures that will enhance the introduction of project management processes that will be used by project
managers. The organisation should encourage project managers to refer to and use these as a guide in the management of their projects, for example, blank forms and detailed descriptions supporting each step of the process must made available.

Most project managers are equipped with laptop technology these days, thus the organisation should also consider the selection of a standard software package. The cost implication of the software should be investigated carefully; it should add value to the organisation.

5.3.2 Career path

The organisation should design a career path for project managers and the team. The career path should be designed in a way that attracts, retains and develops people who are either project managers already or have the capability to become professional project managers.

Knutson (2001:328) recommends ten categories that should form part of the career path plan:

- **Personnel data**: entails the current and proposed level, total years of experience, past performance appraisal rating and so forth.

- **Professional orientation**: a direct reflection of the project manager’s ability to execute the required skills.

- **Education**: involves a numeric score based on the defined training and education programme and the role of the project manager, as well as the level of performance demonstrated. A certain level may require the
attainment of a certificate, while another, higher level requires PMP certification.

- **Interpersonal skills**: based on the project manager’s internal and external demonstration.

- **Technical coaching**: with respect to project management knowledge involves the ability to provide guidance to others.

- **Business acumen**: entails the ability to gain an understanding of the client’s needs and the overall understanding of the organisation.

- **Customer focus**: involves the ability to provide complete management of the client’s needs through the project’s life cycle.

- **Technical complexity**: entails the ability to manage highly complex and integrated projects, to provide leadership that allows all involved to understand, to develop plans, and to implement complex projects.

- **Complexity of projects managed**: deals with the number of processes or organisations involved in the project, the number of projects being managed concurrently by the project manager, or the type of management applied.

- **Nature of work environment**: concerns the ability to manage uncertainty of project activities while maintaining full compliance with the triple constraint. The triple constraint refers to the primary focus of the overall project management process, the success criteria for effective project management: on time, within budget/cost, and according to the requirements/specifications.

Active participation and involvement with the Project Management Institute (PMI) has been proven to be invaluable, the project managers are able to demonstrate
their commitment and dedication to the profession through their support of the PMI (Knutson 2001:332).

5.4 CLOSURE

The majority of project managers do not know how or why they were assigned the project manager’s job (Brad’s case is a good example). Unfortunately, many “accidental” project managers who take on the role of project manager do not possess the right skills, characteristics and background to effectively manage organisational projects and these result in many project failures.

Organisations investing their money in training and development programmes typically have good returns on their investment. Career paths help project managers improve their skills and capabilities in managing each of their projects.

The next chapter concludes this study.