

The art of creating urgency in part-time project teams



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Times are challenging and companies need to move faster than ever before to react and act in the current crisis environment. To do this, many companies launch a series of business improvement initiatives, mostly focusing on short term bottom line and cash flow improvements, or to set the base to get a better starting position once the economy picks up again.

As a consequence, corporate action logs are filled with initiatives that are assigned to owners who are in charge to turn the initiative into action and achieve expected business outcomes. These initiative owners or project managers (usually the stronger people in the organization) then create project plans and a project team to attack the issue.

Unfortunately, many companies will later discover that not much has happened and the company is far away from turning the initial good ideas into business results. There are many reasons this happens. One of the most frequent is that the project teams didn't take the initiative serious enough; didn't re-allocate their time and continued focusing on their main jobs rather than putting sufficient effort into the improvement initiative. This happens everywhere despite

visible messages and communications from top management about the importance and urgency of those initiatives.

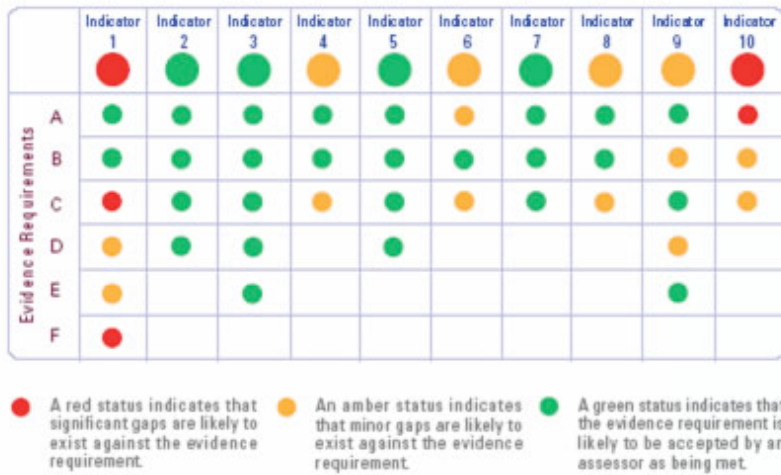
From the point of view of the team member it's understandable. During crisis times the pressure on the core business can be very high. Downsizing activities and hiring freezes may have increased workload and now top management also wants to complete special projects and initiatives.

So, what can the project manager do to create sufficient urgency in the team so that this initiative receives sufficient attention and can be completed within the expected "as early as possible" time frame?

Every project starts with a good project definition, i.e. objectives, expected benefits, scope, etc. and a well structured project plan that everyone understands and can commit to. If timelines are too aggressive people will not take them seriously. If they are too relaxed, people will prioritize other tasks over this project since 'there is still so much time available'. It's important that project teams understand all aspects of the plan especially dependencies and critical paths. This will enable them to help the project

manager identify issues and risks early. For sufficient buy-in, the project plan must be 'negotiated' with team members. Team members must be given the chance to give feedback on the feasibility and after revision commit to the plan. Not too few and not too many milestones need to be set together with the team - just as many to keep track of the project's progress. Milestones should be coupled with deliverables and ideally criteria for achieving the expected quality of the deliverables should be defined as well. At this point it's crucial that project members clearly understand how the milestones and respective deliverables are related to the actual goal: "achieving business benefits". This will help, adjusting the project plan to new realities if changes in the business or newly available information





make the original plan obsolete. Knowing how every single deliverable adds value to the business can be a strong motivation for the team.

Once everybody is clear on project goals, plans and deliverables, the project manager must create a result oriented project culture. Rather than focusing on tasks, i.e. what has to be done, all communication must focus on achievement of deliverables, i.e. the results of all actions. The main tool to drive the project is regular status meetings, usually every one to two weeks. The time of these meetings should be fixed at the beginning of the project for the whole project life. This ensures team members will be available and get in the rhythm of constant delivery check-ups. In these meetings key risks and issues on milestones and respective deliverables need to be discussed. People tend to get caught in day-to-day issues rather than keeping the “big picture” (the project goal) in mind. By asking the team (bi)-weekly what risks they see that may prevent them from achieving key milestones and what can be done to mitigate these risks will create a feeling

of urgency. It will also give the team the chance to raise concerns to decision makers. Team members knowing that they are being listened to can be another valuable motivating factor.

Part-time projects are tricky. Too often, people end up trying to multi-task their project work on top of their day-to-day activities. To minimize the interference between day-to-day job responsibilities and project work, it’s recommended to introduce ‘project days’, e.g. every Tuesday and Thursday the project team gets together to work on the project activities. Ideally, there will be a project room available to move people physically and mentally away from their day-to-day jobs.

So far we talked about intrinsic motivation drivers, such as clearly communicating project goals and purpose to get the team excited about the task, creating constant awareness on timing of deliverables to keep the momentum and providing the right environment to achieve sufficient focus on required activities.

To boost motivation further, tools for externally driven motivation should be applied as

well. To do this, the project should report regularly to a so called Steering Board, a committee that usually comprises members of the Top Management. This will help develop in team members the feeling that their hard project work will be recognized by their bosses, which is especially important if successful project completion is not listed in the annual performance metrics of the employee. Some companies even ask project teams to present their successes to a broader audience. Apart from overall awareness of employees of what’s going on in the company, this can give the project team a feeling of pride that will help them to put all their energy in making the project a success.



The points above outline the basic necessary principles that we consider necessary to achieve sufficient motivation and momentum in our projects. However, in the end we should not forget that project teams consist of individuals who have very different needs. In the end, even if general principles are applied, the project manager has to carefully consider every single team member’s needs and then take appropriate action. This is why effective project management still remains being an art as well as a science.