Fencing Wire and Project Management

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Abstract: Where innovative responses to crises are the norm within an organisation, the discipline of project management can seem overwhelmingly burdensome. This article explores the issues that exist and what is required to make the transition from a "she'll be right" culture to one seeking consistent success by establishing and following best practices.

New Zealand culture which relies on innovation with the application of number 8 fencing wire to mend all problems is alive, well and problematic. It is the equivalent to TV's MacGyver and his infinite and fanciful ability to use duct tape to extricate himself from any difficulty. Anything that hampers the need for and development of on-the-spot workarounds to problems is seen as robbing society of proof that New Zealand is still alive, well, and capable of responding to any issue. And though No. 8 fencing wire is well recognised in New Zealand because of our agricultural background and the millions of miles (or kilometres) of fencing that exists, it is also an attitude well represented around the world.

With it discipline and rigour, project management is often considered as the ultimate adversary to this No. 8 fencing wire approach. Project management is judged as too rigid because of it formal processes for managing scope, schedule, budget, risk, quality, procurement, communications etc. The claim is that it robs vibrant individuals and organisations of the freedom to develop spontaneous approaches to crises, and diminishes the perceived heroism of dealing with another woeful situation. In a culture that applauds the capability to respond to disaster, an approach that seeks to reduce the likelihood of problems, and which requires concerted, consistent effort in a disciplined manner carries little value. Activities such as planning and preparation, developing contingencies and clearly articulating goals, objectives and requirements only receive lip service and no real support. Successful crisis response is most often the basis for reward and recognition, rather than on planning to avoid them. It is a wholly different thing for a culture to change and truly value the consistent planning and avoidance of issues, where the need to resort to the fire-fighting approach is curtailed. We still live in the mythology of knights in shining armour saving the day at the last moment.

Let's imagine what individuals and organisations that have embraced and fully committed to project management may be like.

The organisation has a clear strategic plan including its values, core purpose and long-range (beyond the strategic horizon) goals. At the strategic level it has established clear goals, objectives and actions with clear metrics against which progress against the strategy are measured. Operational plans are aligned with and supportive of the strategic plan.

The organisation must deal with two forms of activity: maintaining and strengthening established programmes and operations, and initiating change within the organisation. In the days of peace and quiet, and little competition, focus was on doing what we already do better. It was sufficient to develop operational excellence to be ahead of the competition. Change is more rapid now. Consequently greater levels of investment are applied to creating new organisational capabilities; work that is performed through projects.

With so many pressures from outside the organisation and voices within demanding an endless list of outcomes and possibilities, it would be easy to lose sight of the strategy, and founder in the confusion

of choice. Not as much of a problem for this organisation. All projects are tested and qualified against criteria that emerge from the strategic planning process. The organisation has a clear understanding of what capabilities it must develop, what those capabilities are worth, and therefore how much they are willing to invest. *They are able to choose projects that maximise their Return-On-Investment (ROI)*. The process of project selection or qualification also ensures there is assess to necessary resources — people, time and money — required for successfully executing the projects, and they are initiated with well defined success/completion criteria. Because the organisation is working from a strategic perspective, time frames for achieving results are better understood, the effort required realistically assessed and commitment easier to make. There is less fear of disturbance because the organisation is moving forward based on vision rather than reaction. Though crises arise, they are dealt with from a longer-term frame of reference.

Selected projects are properly defined, resourced, and assigned. Standards for preparing plans, estimates, reporting etc are established and adhered to. More effective empowerment within well defined and delegated responsibilities results from clearly defined thresholds identifying when to escalate issues to higher authority. Management's clear example of planning, delegation and empowerment are replicated throughout the organisation and within project teams. Plans are developed and actively managed against them. Workarounds are implemented to resolve unreasonable variances between planned and actual results. But these workarounds are prepared based on well defined risk management/issue management processes, and these are topics that are standard in the regular team meetings.

The organisation also has a *realistic appreciation of the investment and support required to develop project management competencies within individuals and across the organisation*. Simply sending a person on a course is not going to wash. Taking the valuable contents of a course, or many courses, and applying them to the work environment requires mentoring, coaching and other support to enable a person to develop as a competent, confident and effective project manager. Other support may include formalised methodologies, workshops on pressing developmental issues, linking performance with compensation, and removing cultural and procedural roadblocks from within the organisation.

Barriers to successfully implementing an effective strategic and project management framework include:

- Project managers generally come from within the organisation, and carry with them the same cultural norms that make it difficult for the organisation to make the transition.
- When pressure develops and urgency grows it becomes very easy to abandon new and apparently burdensome and impeding processes for the light, flexible, fire-fighting freedom of the past (yesterday or just a few minutes ago!).
- Few organisations have reliable financial or performance data. This impeded the ability to conduct proper cost/benefit analyses or measure the success of change initiatives.
- Politics and career insecurity! Organisations comprise individuals who each work for their own reasons, have their own agenda, and when an organisational change initiative is seen to fail they may be able to profit from that to their own advantage.
- True commitment, where failure is possible and is likely to undermine a person's job security, becomes very difficult to obtain. Most people prefer to divide their attention so they can choose the winner later, but that sabotages the process with lack of clear direction.
- Only give me good news! The person or group that voices bad news, or provides feedback considered negative etc, becomes the target of criticism rather than drawn upon for input further in the process. The problem is that without those willing to declare the harsh realities an organisation can maintain its façade of well being longer, potentially with drastic longer-term consequences.
- At a project level familiarity with similar endeavours breeds complacency. Most project managers come from technical fields. Those who do not consider they need project management also tend to be from technical fields (i.e. a specialised area of expertise they are

comfortable and competent in). In looking at a new project they see what is familiar and miss what is outside their experience, and this leads to overly optimistic estimates of time and cost, with failure to recognise risks and downstream impacts of their approach. It takes great discipline to move past what you know you know, and examine what you know you don't know, and even more to locate what you don't know you don't know. It is those areas that contain the traps.

Simple mechanisms for overcoming these barriers and moving from the no. 8 fencing wire mentality to a formal, disciplined and consistent approach include:

- Commitment! Commitment! Commitment! This needs to come from the top down through the organisation. Without it anything and nothing will do.
- Encourage change makers. Find those willing to make a stand and push for change and give them voice. Again success here lies in management taking the lead and consistently supporting cultural change.
- Do not do it by halves. Decide to change or decide to not change, but do not do either by halves. Apply backbone and courage to your decision, and put it into effect. If you have not made a decision, do not act on it. So many take action with the idea that the decision will become clearer further on. Make it now, or explore so that you can, but do not act for the sake of it. That is back into fire-fighting mode.
- Plan the communications and involvement plan, otherwise known as the stakeholder management plan. Involvement with genuine listening and consideration of feedback enables a smoother path through any change.

I find it exciting when organisations and individuals embrace change and seek ways of developing themselves and their organisations. I find it incredibly frustrating, and much more usual, when failure to focus on the bigger picture and allows concerns and issues to erode progress. The world is changing. The competitors of tomorrow are not those of today. If we do not change sufficiently, that is okay. The world will not miss us, even if a few individuals may.

If your organisation needs to undertake change, wishes to develop new capabilities for managing the process, is willing to front up with the commitment and courage required then I am your catalyst. Making difficult changes within an organisation, particularly changing culture, is an exciting process. It carries pain and threat. It will upset people. If you are ready to learn and implement what is required, and are not afraid of hearing and dealing with tough feedback, then contact HIL. *As a Catalyst I facilitate change with reduced pain.* There are ways of making the process easier and less painful. The HIL purpose is advancing the wholeness and effectiveness of organisations and individuals. Integrity, openness, ethics and courtesy are the basis for delivering against our purpose.