

Do or Die Project Management: Lessons Learned from a Zero-Day Project¹

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ABSTRACT

Projects take on a number of shapes, forms and lives of their own. Some are more successful than others depending on outside factors. The “Do or Die Project Management: Lessons Learned from a Zero-Day Project” project gets that name from the main feature of the project: the no float execution time. Execution time affected all aspects of the project including planning, execution, cost, risk, communication and closeout. The lessons learned from this project point to key factors, such as risk and communications management, which allowed it to be successful and points to factors that could have been detrimental. By examining these lessons project managers will be able to apply key insights to future projects that have similarities to “Zero-Day.”

INTRODUCTION

The Zero Day project entailed planning an office move of all technical systems including desktop computers, telephones, peripheral equipment, televisions, network equipment, wires, cables, and servers and racks. The planning team was given nine months for planning the move. The goal was to move from Building A to Building B in three days.

This paper will review lessons learned about critical phases of the project, but will primarily focus on the execution phase and managing the communications of this phase. Questions we were required to answer included: What are the goals? What does it take to get there? What are the costs? Who will do the work? How will we know it was successful? What are the risks? What are the assumptions?

PLANNING

Planning is of utmost importance in any project. However, in the Zero Day project, because of the very limited execution time, the planning phase was imperative. Planning activities included: contractor meetings, moving companies, temporary help, facilities management for the current site, and facilities management for the new site. Our planning team was created immediately

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after the decision to move. With a limited organizational budget, our planning team consisted of support managers already in place, including the Office Manager, Facilities Manager, IT Manager, Library Manager and Security. The planning staff had to quickly become move experts and project management experts in addition to working our normal day jobs. The overall planning time was nine months, and included several additional vendors including professional office movers, ISPs, telecommunications experts, furniture vendors, and communications experts.

COMMUNICATION

Communicate, communicate, communicate – with your stakeholders.

The critical planning requirements and tight, no float schedule required the project planning team to assemble an airtight communications plan for before, during execution and after the move. The IT Project Manager has authority over technology solutions, but little authority regarding users' actions. This required the IT Project Manager to examine the most effective ways to communicate. The method of communication is just as important as the message. Understanding the culture of the audience and authoritative sources are critical. It is important to know the value of each stakeholder group, and your influences as a project manager at various stages of the project. Four general areas of authority that a project manager may or may not have include:

- **Legitimate authority over others:** Induces compliance because team members “report” to the project manager.
- **Ability to reward:** Project manager does not have subordinates but can provide rewards such as recognition, awards, promotion potential, and recommendations.
- **Status by association:** Project manager may not be a direct line manager, but she may be a senior leader in the organization and commands respect because of her work colleagues' associations.
- **Coercive inducement:** Involves the use of punishments or a right to veto. The project manager may have the ability to implement corrective action and consequences (Dann, 2014).

In order to communicate effectively, manage change, and ensure all stakeholders are dancing according to the project manager's rhythm, the project manager must know the authority she has, the authority of her stakeholders, and adjust the communication style accordingly, using persuasion, challenge, or negotiation.

- **Persuasion:** Follows a rational process of getting others to agree with you.
- **Challenging:** May require stating the rules, policy or the “email” from a respected authority.

- **Negotiation:** Finding and understanding the other party's needs and concerns, and turning that into a bargaining chip to give them what they want so that you can get what you want (Dann, 2014).

Before the office move, the IT Project Manager used *persuasion* to establish key messages to the office users. The project manager should also do her homework in other areas of communication. Take the time to know the audience, set clear expectations, rehearse communication messages, and pay attention to detail (*sweat the small stuff*).

Know your audience...well. Our users included professional researchers in several diverse topics including science and health. Approximately eighty percent of our users were PhD educated. Our communications had to be clear, concise and detailed. When working with highly qualified subject matter experts, it is important to be transparent and state what you know and what you don't know (Pietrucha, 2014). Our planning team stated up front that while we were not move experts, we worked closely with professional move vendors with the appropriate expertise and that we would communicate all pertinent information to our users.

Set expectations: It is important to state upfront, early and repeatedly, what you and your team expect from your users (Pietrucha, 2014). Take extra time to explain complicated procedures and provide plenty of time for questions. A highly technical audience wants to know the intricate details of the plan, even if they will not be remotely involved in the process. Understanding our technical audience required our planning team to provide clear details about pre-move, move, and after-move activities. Our team used multiple mediums including written outlines as well as diagrams and charts to convey expectations.

Draft and rehearse: Prepare written and spoken communications well ahead of time and rehearse in front of a sample audience (Pietrucha, 2014). This could be simply one or two hand-picked users who will give you honest feedback about the holes in your message. If possible, select some of the most particular users to be your sample. This provides for achieving project success and will prepare you for questions that arise during "live audience" communication meetings. Before each meeting we held mini-meetings with a sample audience to test delivery and feedback.

Sweat the small stuff: The U.S. Patent Trademark Office (USPTO) received over half a million patent applications in 2012. However, a significant number of the applications were returned because of issues regarding improper English. Patent inspectors were not able to process the applications because they could not understand the explanations of the technology or product (Pietrucha, 2014). While we are not patent applicants investing in a new invention, product or technology, project managers have a considerable investment in ensuring a smooth project execution. Our "investment" in planning, specifically our communication to our stakeholders, is critical. Put the time into writing communication messages well. If the audience is highly educated, this fact is even more essential. Aim for writing at an eighth grade level for most audiences. The New York Times and similar publications are usually scored in that range

(Pietrucha, 2014). Pay particular attention to clarity. Use appropriate grammar. Research the message and selected vocabulary the old fashioned way, with a check of the dictionary and thesaurus. While it is rare to find an actual dictionary book on the desk of today's work force, most communications professionals have a dictionary at arm's length and review it often. That's why they are experts. Our planning team developed communications messages, reviewed them at our internal planning meetings, and used our sample user team to review each message and give us feedback.

The Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) "The Analyst's Style Manual" provides key communication points that can be used to develop consistent communication messages:

- Insert the main idea up front
- Write short paragraphs and sentences
- Use active voice
- Use short, conventional words
- Be correct, credible and complete (Pietrucha, 2014).

RISK

Identifying risk is a critical component of project management and often does not receive enough attention. While it is important to identify the risk, it is essential to analyze risk, develop risk mitigation techniques, and practice mitigation solutions whenever possible. One of the largest risks in this project which affected the project schedule, was the availability of the Building A loading dock. The planning team walked through the project schedule hour by hour from two days before the move, throughout the move, and one day after move. During the step by step process, we realized that there was a conflict for the use of Building A loading dock. Building A had only two ramp loading docks and was located on a congested downtown street with limited dock space. One of the docks was scheduled to be in use the entire evening by the building management. That left only one dock for our equipment move. The IT Department planned to lock down the loading dock for a constant flow of equipment loading. However, Facilities also planned to use the loading dock for furniture loading.

After combining the furniture and equipment schedules, we realized that there would be a conflict and delays in loading the equipment and moving the trucks within the allotted service time. Any delay would have affected the move-in schedule beginning the following morning. The problem created a huge conflict and disagreements between Facilities and IT that lasted hours. The Facilities and IT managers worked together and continued negotiations, adjusting and re-adjusting the project schedule, and eventually developed a plan that would accommodate both requirements.

COMMUNICATION PLAN IN ACTION

Nine months ahead: The Office Director sent out initial email communication announcing the move.

Two months ahead: The planning team told users how the move will affect them. We told them what time they were required to shut down computers and when they could expect to log in again. We told users what would be working on Tuesday morning, and what would not be working.

One month ahead: The team provided specific details about shut down and ramp-up times. Users would not be able to work from home or remotely during the weekend. We were expected to have an 80% success rate with up-time on Tuesday morning. We made posters and hung them throughout the office reminding users about the weekend move and down time.

Two weeks ahead: Our team hosted a mandatory move “town hall” meeting featuring presentations from each support area: Facilities, IT, Library Services, Records Management, and Security. Each manager gave a briefing that laid out the plans and expectations for users. Users asked specific questions of each manager during the meeting.

One week ahead and day before move: The team sent an email to users with shut down times and directions for leaving desktops computers, phones, etc., and answered individual questions.

Day of Move: We established team leads, packed over 400 pieces of desktop equipment and over 200 network and communications equipment, moved equipment to the new location; disconnected, loaded, unloaded and reconnected all items. The project team was in constant communication using radios, checkpoints, and periodic planning sessions throughout the 3-day weekend to enable making critical decisions quickly.

Line up your stakeholder advocates: Keep your CEO, VP and Directors (basically all stakeholders) on speed-dial and don’t be afraid to use it. The critical path of this project was solely based on the start and end times for the desktop move which included uninstalling, packing, moving, installing and testing 400 desktop computers. However, Building B had a problematic path from the loading dock to the offices. The building was attached to a shopping mall that included movie theaters. The shopping mall sat between the building and the underground loading dock. The path required moving pallets and carts of equipment from the loading dock, around the movie theater to the Building B service elevators.

During the move on Saturday morning, equipment moved according to plan of the hourly schedule. After 1:00 pm on Saturday, our movers were told to “shut down all move operations.” The constant moving of equipment made too much noise and movie goers complained to Mall management. Mall Management complained to Building Management, who complained to the IT Project Manager. When the IT Project Manager asked when operations could resume, they were told “after the movie schedule” which was midnight on Saturday. This solution would practically

eliminate our schedule and WBS task flow, which was extremely tight with no float. The project schedule left a maximum of 60 minutes delay. An eight hour delay would kill the project. The IT Project Manager immediately called the Vice President, and made it clear to him that the delay would shut down the project. Our VP began negotiation discussions with the Mall Manager. At the same time, our facilities crew and movers put their heads together and came up with a workaround. The team disassembled moving boxes, taped them down to the concrete floors and made a cardboard carpet runner. We convinced mall management that we would be “much quieter” and were allowed to resume operations.

This was a key example of the need to use persuasion, negotiation and authority. Negotiating with mall management and supervisors, and persuading senior leaders to use their authority as respected building tenants provided a solution. Without the intervention of the VP, we would have wasted at least another two hours negotiating the continuation of the move, and possibly another eight hours in delays from a move shutdown.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the project was completed on time. Our project teams worked 18 hour days during the three-day weekend and provided 92% up time and computer/network availability on Tuesday morning, when users arrived back to the office. Although exhausted, our technical planning team continued to work hard throughout the rest of the week providing technical support and addressing connectivity issues. Several months of planning, risk management and most importantly, communications management allowed for a successful Office Move project that was completed on-time and within budget.

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Elizabeth Rodgers is an experienced and certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and ITIL Foundations professional with more than 20 years of information technology experience. As a Lead Associate for Booz Allen Hamilton, Elizabeth uses best practices and industry standards to deliver several high-level projects to federal government clients in the cybersecurity and law enforcement industries. She has proven qualifications in project management, service management, knowledge management, technology operations and process improvement with the expertise to consistently exceed organizational goals. Elizabeth holds a Bachelor's degree from Georgetown University, an M.S. in Cybersecurity Policy from the University of Maryland University College, and is a Deloitte Cybersecurity Scholarship Award Recipient. Elizabeth Rodgers can be contacted at lizrodgers100@gmail.com.