

The Five Stages of Grief: (aka Setting Up an Enterprise Project Portfolio Management Organization)¹

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ABSTRACT

If you or someone you love has experienced a loss or a tragedy, you might be familiar with the five stages of grief. What no one may have told you is that professional organizations facing a major change also experience these phases. In this paper, the authors will share with you their experience implementing the Enterprise Project Management Office (EPMO) at the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS). This office was created in order to manage the strategic execution cycle at the department and ensure that priorities and the most valuable initiatives were accomplished.

The authors will explain what you really need to know and what to expect when establishing an enterprise level organization that is responsible for the strategic execution cycle. They will provide valuable insight into the hurdles and roadblocks that might be encountered, along with strategies for overcoming them. They will also discuss the critical need for buy-in and what to expect when that isn't achieved at the right time, by the right people. The authors will focus on the integral role that people play in change and execution, and will provide valuable insight into techniques that might be used to minimize conflict and increase collaboration.

FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

In 1969, Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross studied terminally ill patients and released a book, *On Death and Dying*¹, which outlined the five stages of grief. The five stages are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.

Traditionally, the five stages of grief are discussed in context of a personal loss or tragedy. However, more recently, the concepts have been applied to organizations as they undergo major change.

¹ *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the [3rd annual University of Maryland Project Management Symposium in College Park, Maryland, USA in May 2016](#). It is republished here with the permission of the authors and conference organizers.*

In December of 2011, the director of the DPS established the EPMO to ensure that all of the department's priority projects were completed efficiently and effectively, and to ensure he had visibility into the process along the way. While this directive was clear to the EPMO leadership, it was potentially less than clear to the stakeholders who would soon be impacted by this major change.

STAGE 1: DENIAL

The EPMO was created and was charged with not only standing up the organization, but also communicating the need for the organization to their stakeholders. As part of this initial communication, EPMO leadership had to explain the director's intent to seek a more effective means of planning and prioritization at the enterprise level. This reality resulted in some initial denial from stakeholders.

There were two groups of thought experiencing this denial. Some business areas "wanted it all" and didn't see a need to identify dependencies or prioritize efforts. Some support areas believed they could "do it all" and wanted to provide service for every new innovative idea. However, this line of thought was the underlying cause of the problem with resource allocation that requires the need for prioritization.

Despite the communication efforts across the agency to highlight the purpose of this new organization, several areas continued to attempt to initiate projects on their own. It was clear that a strong communication campaign would be necessary to manage stakeholder expectations and to gain buy-in for the new organization by demonstrating how it would benefit both the agency and the individual business units. Along with creating a customized communication plan based upon each stakeholder group, EPMO leadership also developed a milestone diagram as the foundation for a communication tool to have conversations with leadership.

STAGE 2: ANGER

Once the EPMO was established, they created a charter in order to codify their role for the rest of the agency.

The initial charter¹ described that the EPMO had been created to serve the department by:

- Overseeing the management of enterprise and priority projects;
- Coordinating and overseeing enterprise and priority programs;
- Overseeing alignment of resources (financial and human) to support priority projects;
- Coordinating and overseeing the prioritization of projects;
- Providing a channel of communication for project status, financial health, and mitigation of issues, risk, and dependencies across projects, departments, and/or divisions;

- Providing a channel of communication to achieve efficiencies with project execution and Agency contracting and procurement; and
- Communicating the results and progress of the agency projects to executive management to ensure they are incorporated to future requests to the Legislature during the Legislative session.

While the language in the charter accurately codified the director's intent, it also created some discomfort for others throughout the agency who may have believed that their organizations would be negatively impacted by this change, due to additional oversight and the possibility that not all of the individual unit priorities would rise to the level of being at the top of the agency priorities.

Project portfolio management was established at DPS to help identify the priority of projects in the portfolio based on factors that demonstrated alignment to legislative requirements and strategic objectives. Many times, due to funding and the requirement to implement legislative mandates, newly mandated projects would generally take precedence over those projects that were being pursued as a way to innovate or modernize a business process. This prioritization was critical to demonstrating how resources needed to be applied (i.e., to minimize situations where agency priorities would not be completed, or not be completed on-time and on-budget. For those areas with projects that typically fell outside of the scope of funded mandates or critical infrastructure operations, this meant they would have limited access to resources required to address their requests.

Through the enterprise model, transparency into actual status and effort was achieved. The agency began tracking and reporting project resources hours and project budgets. A change control system was introduced, along with reporting on the impact of changes to resource utilization and costs. This additional visibility demonstrated that more time should be spent on effective project planning and estimating.

Project controls also identified risks or issues to projects associated with resource allocation and competing demands. These competing demands were not necessarily other projects that required the same resources. The competition also came from maintenance efforts. This level of transparency provided the leadership team with the information needed to have the right conversations and make informed decisions about where the resources were more urgently needed. This visibility was perceived by others as negatively exposing resource constraints within their operations.

Rather than understanding the new process was beneficial to their unit, and a way to receive the help and support needed to successfully reach its goals, the new system was initially seen by some as a drawback. This again highlighted the need for strong stakeholder and communication plans and additional methods to seek buy-in from those being affected by the change.

STAGE 3: BARGAINING

As the EPMO established effective relationships, they gained buy-in from the business executives. The buy-in was created due to the EPMO leadership effectively convincing the business areas why the change was important and the direct benefit they would receive from this office.

This process of bargaining included things such as explaining why filling out a business case would be ultimately beneficial to the success of a project; addressing questions about how to alternatively staff desired efforts through methods such as contracts or temporary services; and trying to include the business areas in development of the processes, templates and procedures.

EPMO leadership met with each business area's leadership team and elicited feedback into the baseline processes. Having this feedback, and making trade-offs in those areas of the processes, procedures, and templates that would not impact the overall objective of the organization, provided a method to gain both buy-in and understanding from the majority of the stakeholders.

The EPMO also requested ongoing representation from each business unit to serve on a process improvement team that would support ongoing assessment and feedback on the enterprise project processes over time and as "lessons learned" were conducted. This level of inclusion provided the various stakeholder groups with some sense of ownership in the new processes they would be following.

STAGE 4: DEPRESSION

Despite the efforts to include representation from across the organization in the development of the processes that would serve to request, analyze, and deliver projects, there were still some stakeholder areas that remained unsure of the need. With organizational change comes some form of non-compliance that takes time to identify, assess, understand, and correct.

EPMO leadership knew that stronger partnerships with these areas would need to be established in order for the objectives of the office to be met. They began working more closely with the areas that were inadvertently duplicating efforts to determine whether certain elements of the process needed to be modified in order to accomplish what the unit needed. Some modifications were made to the process. For example, the business case template was revised to capture additional detail to accommodate specific needs of those areas that had previously been unknown. This mitigated the problem of duplication. Sporadically, efforts continued to be identified that competed against the enterprise projects. However, by reporting the project status to leadership on a regular basis, they were able to gain insight into resource challenges that impacted project schedules and costs, and give direction to course correct as needed.

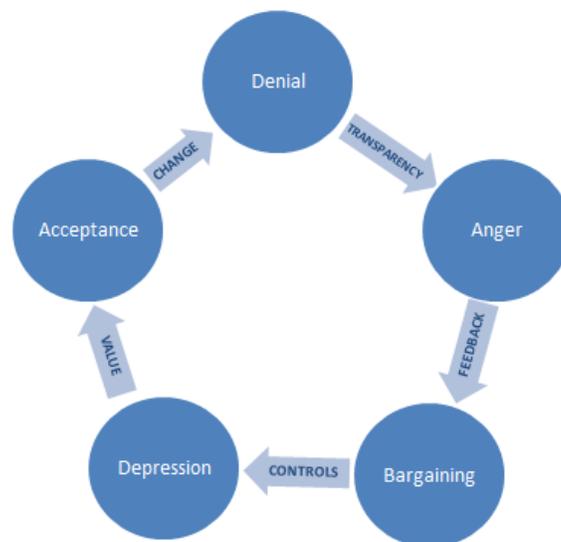
STAGE 5: ACCEPTANCE

After several months working in the new enterprise process, business divisions noticed that with transparency and prioritization, they were able to see progress in their projects, or at a minimum understand the reasons for any stalled progress. This transparency gave them the insight required to provide better direction about how to move forward and balance the needs of the agency.

Once the stakeholders adjusted and became accustomed to this change in the way of doing business, they ultimately understood the benefits the director had originally envisioned. With this acceptance came compliance from the vast majority of the department, which substantially improved project planning and delivery.

CONCLUSION

Undergoing significant organizational change can be challenging. It is critical to provide constant and thorough communication to the individuals and business areas that will be impacted by the change. Furthermore, it is imperative that the communication not only explain the changes and the benefits of those changes, but the communication must also be multi-directional. In order to gain buy-in and successful adoption of impending change, communication must also focus on asking for feedback and input as to how best to implement and address the change. Bringing stakeholder groups together for open dialogue and discussion on implementation of change will better position the organization for a successful rollout and can eliminate some challenges associated with lack of understanding and resistance to change.



Ultimately, leaders from the business divisions began to champion the DPS EPMO. By this time, the new enterprise processes had already resulted in an improved success rate of approximately 50% in the project and contract space, but that rate needed to further improve.

In late 2015, the decision was made to move all of the planning and project management resources remaining in the agency to the EPMO to help eliminate any residual competing processes. With the consolidation of these teams, further efficiencies were gained in the processes, customer expectations were more successfully managed, relationships improved, and more priorities were successfully accomplished.

REFERENCES

- i. Kubler-Ross, E (1969) *On Death and Dying*, Routledge ISBN 0-415-04015-9
- ii. Policy, Project and Portfolio Management Office, Texas Department of Public Safety (2013) Charter

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