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Part 5 Barriers to Collaboration
The Road to Responsible Collaboration
by Robin Hornby

The Road to Responsible Collaboration[1]

Part 5 Barriers to Collaboration [2]

Robin Hornby

Summary: *In this series, Robin Hornby argues that the effectiveness of project management is improved by driving project responsibility into the organization and creating conditions favorable to 'responsible collaboration'. But this collaborative environment will not naturally fall into place without the support of senior management and the adoption of enabling frameworks, guidelines, and techniques. In this fifth article, Robin itemizes the obstacles to collaboration that seem to arise naturally in too many corporate structures and how our existing project management solutions are frequently inadequate.*

Introduction

In my enthusiasm for the collaborative project model, I don't wish to appear dismissive of the genuine difficulties faced by many organizations when building this productive environment. Because the modified techniques and methods required by the model are not inherently difficult, I believe the source of difficulty lies not in the methods but in our organizations. This conclusion is supported by observations from the analogous world of individual project execution. A large body of survey research into causes of project failure has consistently shown technical issues are not the primary reason, but spring from specific organizational and managerial problems.   I will apply this logic to identify the global resistance our collaborative model might encounter and will conclude with an assessment of the damaging consequence - a serious lack of balanced project integration.

Obstacles to Achievement

The goal described in the introductory article[1] is to build a Delivery Organization and to achieve this primarily by constructing project delivery mechanisms based on owner/provider collaboration. But experience has shown that, despite the evident benefits of such an approach, support is not universal. An analysis of possible reasons for this suggests the following:

- Project and Functional Organizations are Incompatible: Corporate units tend to be highly specialized and preoccupied with efficiency. A management hierarchy is inevitable and works well for functional coordination and decision-making. However, managers become

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[1] Editor's note: This series of articles is by Robin Hornby, author of four books including *A Concise Guide to Project Collaboration: Building a Delivery Organization* (Routledge 2023) and *Commercial Project Management: A Guide for Selling and Delivering Professional Services* (Routledge 2017). Learn more about the author in his profile at the end of this article.

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possessive of their staff and may be reluctant to assign resources and take on the Collaborative StakeHolder[3] role if this impacts work for their unit.

- Objectives Framed in Narrow Terms: Anxious to boost their own internal productivity, managers emphasize group objectives to the extent that their workers lose sight of the common goal of the larger organization.

- Disproportionate Functional Team Identification: Too much fostering of group identification and solidarity may result in viewing those not part of the group as 'outsiders'.

- Excess Internal Competition: Some corporations establish working conditions or management policies that result in excessive internal competition. Some businesses benefit from the entrepreneurial culture this generates, but collaborative working becomes more difficult.

- A Culture of Blame: Unfortunately, a competitive culture can sometimes take a negative turn and lead to a habit of blaming other groups if things go wrong. This can arise when accountabilities are unbalanced, and erodes the trust needed for collaboration outside one's group.

- The Silo Mentality: This common metaphor epitomizes the compartmentalisation of corporate functional groups. In a silo world many problems arise. For example, requests for decisions or initiatives involving two or more silos must be approved by the common authority as illustrated in the graphic, Organizational Silos. Resources within the silo report in a hierarchical structure to functional managers. Work requests involving staff in another silo (e.g., A requires help from B) must ascend to the point of common authority (C) before being passed down to the intended resource.
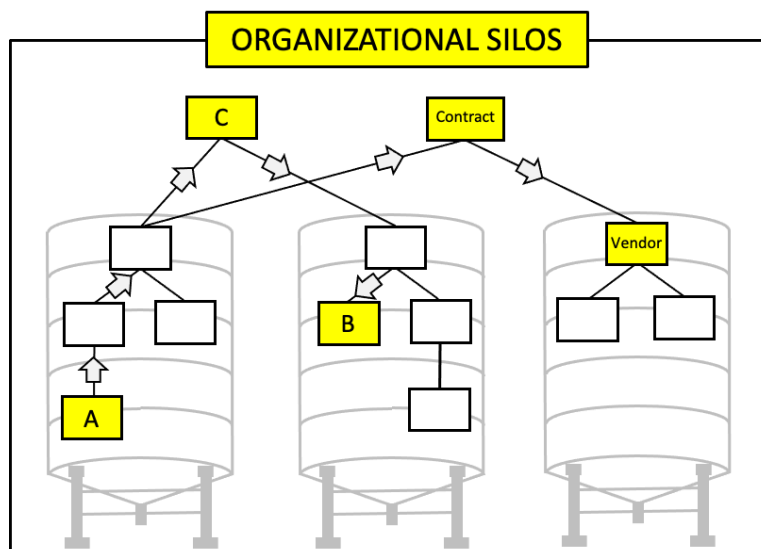
- Vendor/Client Silos: A serious silo effect can occur when a vendor provider is contracted. If a situation arises between the client and the contracted vendor, then the only common authority is the contract. Furthermore, the vendor team really are outsiders and that's how the client sees them. This is compounded if the vendor underestimates the scope and ring-

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fences the project in a misguided attempt to limit scope pressures. Contact is reduced and communications are formalized, further jeopardizing project integration.
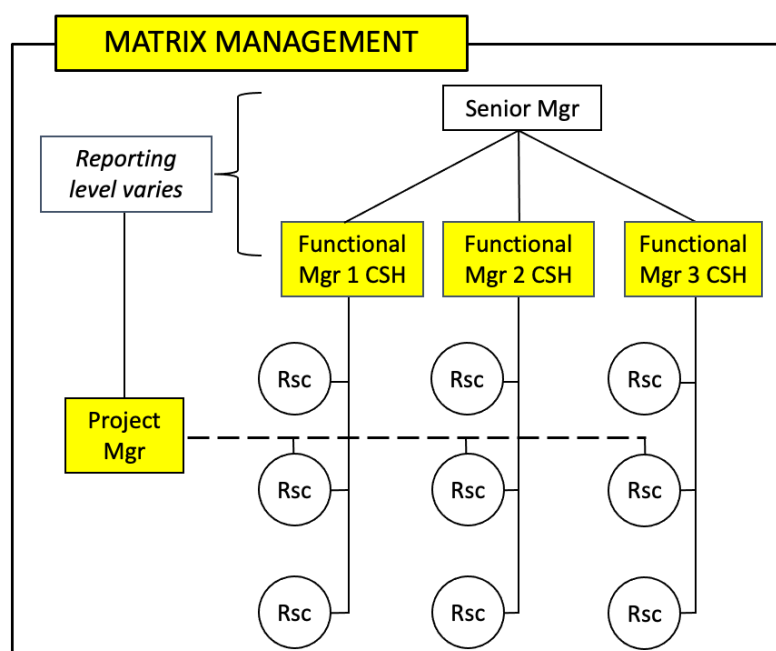
- Threats to Universality: The vision of smoothly integrating vendor and inhouse providers into a Delivery Organization is threatened not only by the high probability of silo behaviour and unhelpful contract provisions, but also perceived (or real) conflicts of interest.

- Inflexible Standards: Inflexible project protocols can also reinforce a negative silo mentality. A typical example is the implication by PMBOK® that the procurement process is initiating a second project, rather than a subcontracted portion of an existing project with which it should be integrated. This leads to the vendor fruitlessly writing 'their own' charter rather than working with the client to update the existing one.

The Matrix Structure is a Partial Solution

A long-standing project approach to tackle some of these problems is the matrix structure. This overlays functional reporting with project reporting and is used by project management (PM) as one attempt to engage functional resources to meet an objective outside their own group.

Other solutions include establishing task forces and liaison committees, using temporary secondments, setting up self-empowered teams, and even abandoning a hierarchical functional organization altogether. But the matrix approach, shown in the diagram Matrix Management, has been adopted for most project work even though difficulties remain. Some of these are:

- Ambiguous Priorities: In a matrix structure every team member has two bosses, or more if they are involved in more than one project. This is a recipe for conflict if different work priorities arise.

- Inability to Manage Accountabilities: Split accountabilities between owner and provider are a notorious source of project imbalance, and matrix management does not go far enough to avoid these problems.

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- Disconnected Viewpoints: Matrix management by itself does not resolve the different views on PM most likely held by provider and owner, nor does it help team members and stakeholders understand the organization of the work and the associated responsibilities.

- Absence of Business Control: Similarly, this approach does not help the provider address the need of the business for information and control. A previous article[2] focussed on this important problem.

The reader will have noted that the matrix diagram includes a significant innovation - each functional manager lending staff to the project is designated as a CSH (Collaborative StakeHolder[3]). This is just one of several innovations required to supplement the matrix solution.

Conclusion

Most projects are aware of the need for technical integration and include mechanisms and project activities to ensure it. But the project itself must also be integrated, meaning management is aligned, redundancy is minimised, direction is coordinated, teams are cohesive, and decisions are openly processed and accepted. Improvements aimed to achieve integration are needed and should eliminate many of the management issues left unresolved by matrix management. Alongside integration, the principle of balance between the role of owner and provider must also apply, to give full opportunity for a harmonious project. Given the tools, and guidance from the PM, owner and provider equilibrium in their respective responsibilities and accountabilities can be achieved. If the obstacles I have summarised are not addressed, then a balanced, integrated project is at risk - most likely impossible. So are our prospects for building a Delivery Organization.

My recent book, *A Concise Guide to Project Collaboration[4],* provides a practical template to enable procedural change and the resolution of these obstacles. It is aimed at corporate managers, not just the PMs, and is designed for both in-house and vendor providers. Managers need to understand the concept and its benefits so they can give their authority for implementation to the PMs, who can use the template the book describes.

Future Articles

The next article presents an innovative architecture to crystallize our objectives, and reviews useful frameworks to support the new environment. The series concludes with practical recommendations on how to build a Delivery Organization.

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About the Author
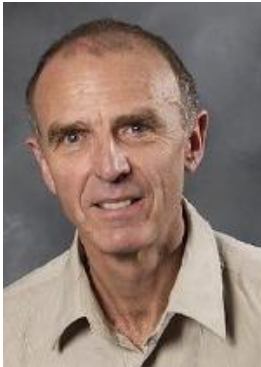
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