
The Future Project Culture¹

The Dark Side of Implementing Project Management Changes²

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and

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Introduction

Both project management trainers and training organizations advertise on project management websites how modern developments, such as Agile, Scrum, artificial intelligence (AI), and project management offices (PMOs) can and will solve most of your project management issues if implemented correctly. Although they are correct for the most part, what they often neglect to discuss are the challenges and issues that must be overcome during implementation, including possible negative effects.

As organizations design the future project culture, implementing changes in project management policies and procedures affects more than just a few people. Each person affected can react differently to the changes especially if they fear they will be removed from their comfort zone. People often also have hidden agendas which can conflict with the expected changes and the impact of the changes may not be fully recognizable until sometime later. There can exist numerous barriers to implementation and achieving the desired favorable outcomes.

Determining what can go wrong has always been a challenge because we start out with high levels of expectations. Many coaches and trainers today emphasize “hoping for the best but planning for the worst.” The negative outcomes are not always visible or predictable, and therefore may not be discussed during training sessions. A few of the possible challenges with implementing changes are discussed in this paper.

¹ This series of articles is by Dr. Harold Kerzner and Dr. Al Zeitoun, the co-authors, along with Dr. Ricardo Vargas, of the textbook *Project Management Next Generation: The Pillars for Organizational Excellence*, published by Wiley in 2022. Learn more about the authors in their profiles at the end of this article.

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Searching for Lessons Learned

Senior management in a North American financial institution recognized the benefits of implementing project management. They established a waterfall methodology for their projects and began seeing successes. However, they also recognized the need for extracting best practices and continuously updating their project management policies and procedures. Unfortunately, this proved more difficult than they had imagined.

Project managers were expected to debrief their project teams at the end of each project and identify lessons learned from both successful and unsuccessful activities. The information would then be turned over to the company's strategic project management office (PMO) for evaluation. Unfortunately, very little information was being identified, and almost all of the information came from successful activities. The PMO became concerned that continuous improvement to project management practices was extremely slow and decided to conduct a detailed audit to determine the causes.

As seen in Figure 1, significant causes were identified as the primary issues for lack of meaningful information on lessons learned:



Figure 1 – Value of Lessons Learned

<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/ai-generated-woman-skills-success-8774130/>

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- Project managers had poor collaboration skills with team members and were unable to encourage team members to speak freely. Project managers had never been trained in how to debrief project team members effectively.
 - People must be willing to share knowledge without fear of criticism. Team members were afraid to discuss lessons learned from any unsuccessful situations or activities that could reflect poorly upon them during their performance reviews.
 - Lessons learned reviews were being conducted at the end of each project and team members that were no longer working on the projects were not being interviewed. This meant that some important lessons learned were not being discovered.

The company assigned a woman from the Human Resources Department to work part-time with the strategic PMO. Although she had limited knowledge about project management, she had been professionally trained in communication skills, especially collaboration skills and emotional intelligence, and knew how to make workers comfortable during project debriefing sessions such that they would be willing to discuss failures as well as successes. The decision was also made to debrief project teams for capturing lessons learned at the end of each project's life cycle phase rather than at the end of each project. The approach was successful, and the woman shared her time between Human Resources and the strategic PMO.

Capturing lessons learned and best practices works best when people are professionally training in how to debrief project personnel.

Information is Power

A large corporation had been highly successful in using project management in each of their divisions. Each division was headed up by a vice president that appeared to support the use of project management and understood the benefits the corporation could expect after successful implementation. The decision was made to establish a strategic PMO to coordinate further expansion and the use of project management throughout the company. The challenge facing corporate senior management was in deciding in which division the strategic PMO should be placed. This seemed like an easy decision to make, but it became troublesome.

Each division VP provided supporting information as to why their division should have control of the strategic PMO. Each VP feared that the new PMO would be able to collect valuable information about each of the divisions and, since information is power, the VP that had control of the PMO would be next in line for promotion to a corporate senior management position. As such, each VP decided to establish a PMO in their divisions and the PMOs would communicate with each other when necessary.

Control of PMOs should not be used as a means for power struggles within organizations.

Fear of PMO Influence

A large printing company decided to implement project management by allowing each functional division to develop their own flexible approach to project management. Although senior management was pleased with the results, they were unhappy with the status reporting because each division reported project progress differently. Senior management identified the need for standardized status reporting and created a strategic PMO reporting to senior management to coordinate status reporting and periodic feedback to senior management.

The VP for IT had several concerns that, based upon the information in status reports, the strategic PMO might tell him how to run the IT organization, especially which workers to assign or reassign to certain projects. He established his own PMO and asked the strategic PMO to handle all communications with IT through his PMO.

Senior management feared that other divisions would do the same thing and decided to take control. Senior management established a waterfall approach that everyone had to use, including a standardized reporting system.

Some degree of standardization is often helpful, but flexible approaches such as with Agile and Scrum would be better. Companies must discover early on during implementation any concerns facing organizational leadership due to the changes.

Organizing for Project Management Growth

A Fortune 500 company had several divisions including a highly successful aerospace division. The aerospace division was the only functional unit using formalized project management. The use of project management was at the request of government agencies. The division had their own waterfall approach but was required to report project status to the government using the Earned Value Management System (EVMS).

As indicated by Figure 2, the success of project management in the aerospace division convinced senior management that project management should be implemented in all of the other divisions, beginning with their commercial products division. The challenge was how to do it.

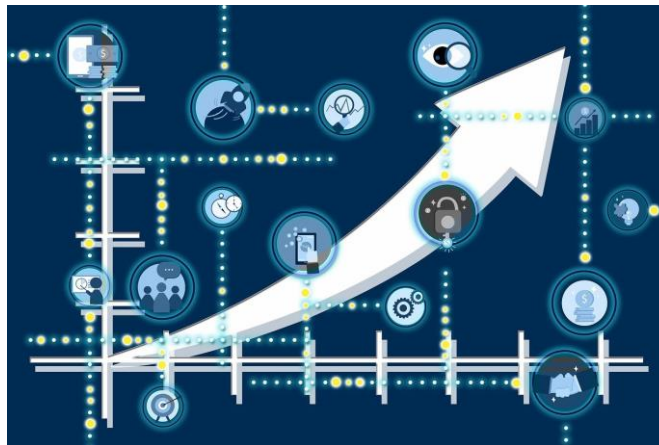


Figure 2 – Growing with Project Management

A senior manager in the aerospace division that had helped set up project management policies and procedures in the aerospace division was reassigned to the commercial products division to establish a project management approach for certain activities. He brought with him all of the policies and procedures used on the aerospace projects and installed them in the commercial products division. Unfortunately, there was significant resistance because:

- The aerospace projects were often significantly longer than the commercial projects.
- The aerospace projects were budgeted in multimillion dollars. Commercial projects were much less costly.
- Aerospace projects used EVMS for status reporting. Commercial projects focused more on business opportunities and alignment to strategic business objectives.

A new set of project management practices had to be developed for the commercial products division.

Today, the business side of project management has become extremely important. Customization to the business unit is mandatory and this usually requires flexible methodologies.

Control of the Requirements

Everyone in the project management community of practice understands the importance of correctly defining the project's requirements at the onset of a project. Usually, we rely upon the customer to define the project's statement of work (SOW). But what happens if the requirements may be unrealistic?

A multinational telecom company developed one of the best waterfall methodologies and published information on it in project management periodicals. Unfortunately, regardless of how good the methodology appeared to be, there were still a significant number of partial failures in delivering customer expectations.

The company's sales force believed that they "owned" the communication rights to each client and that all client communications must go through them. The sales force approved just about every client's SOW without evaluating whether it would be realistic. The sales force also made unrealistic promises to clients to win their business and believed that the clients would pay for downstream scope changes to meet expectations. All of this was done so that the sales force would not have to share bonuses from client sales with project personnel.

To help solve the problem, senior management made two changes. First, a project manager would accompany the salesperson on company visits to sell new business to make sure that what was being promised could be delivered. Second, project management would review each SOW before the signing of a contract with a client. The two changes worked well.

Sometimes there are hidden agendas that people have that can impact successful performance. Once the hidden agendas are known, there are usually several options available for resolution.

THE PATH FORWARD

As can be seen from these examples, project management changes can occur with good results expected. But be careful what you wish for during implementation, the real issues and challenges may appear causing additional changes to be made. Some changes can occur quickly while others may take time. In an ideal situation, the people responsible for implementing the changes would have an excellent vision of the corporate culture and any activities or practices that could unfavorably impact the desired changes.

In designing the future project culture, leaders have to strike the right balance with how much change to implement and at what pace. Critical to the success of implementing any of the changes, is the people. People matter in envisioning what changes to incorporate and what matter most in evangelizing the changes to be implemented to fit a given culture. The mindset and skillset shift that are necessary are at the core of what coaches, trainers, and others who guide the change focus on. The change roadmap has to offer opportunities to illustrate a consistent example for the rest of the organization and demonstrate ways of building an appetite for continual learning.

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About the Authors



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Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.

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- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.
 - The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
 - The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
 - The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
 - Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
 - The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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In his current role with Siemens, he is a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for overseeing the Program Management's Community of Excellence, driving the global program management practices to enhance strategic alignment, and the enablement of the Academic Program in support of the Strategic Transformation priorities. His role also covers ensuring the critical integration of current and future Global Sustainability principles to meet the expectations of Industry 4.0.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at zeitounstrategy@gmail.com