Foster Teamwork and Results through Project Management

By Richard Martin

Project management is a way to manage complex projects and initiatives within organizations. The discipline was originally created during the Second World War as an application of operational research, and then further developed during the massive Cold War projects for nuclear energy and weapons, as well as the space program. Nowadays, project management is used to manage a variety of both "hard" and "soft" projects and change initiatives. In addition to allowing for positive financial and other forms of control, projects are an excellent way to break down internal barriers to cooperation and to focus the efforts of teams on results-based outcomes.

Many companies are faced with increasingly complex and demanding competitive situations. Time to market is critical and companies can no longer afford to spend many months, or even years, developing new products or responding to a changing competitive landscape. One of the reasons for this is internal barriers and "stovepipes" between functional areas. In addition, there are often marked cultural differences between these areas due to variations in professional ethos and education of specialists. Companies often spend inordinate time and resources trying to develop and introduce new products and services simply because of a lack of internal cooperation and communication.

Needless to say, the failure to capitalize on quickly developing competitive opportunities and demand for products and services can lead to poor business results and lost market share. This is where a project based approach can come into play. Projects are organizational initiatives designed to focus managerial effort and organizational/financial resources. While there are a number of conceptual models to identify, evaluate, develop and implement projects, the real crux of the issue is to create effective project teams. This involves two components: project leadership and team composition. Let's address the latter topic first.

There are essentially two forms of project team. The first is the dedicated project team, where the organization sets up a group where all, or most, of the team members are wholly dedicated to managing the project. This is a common occurrence in large organizations that must manage technological projects and where accountabilities are critical, such as infrastructure development, defence weapons acquisition and development, and aircraft development. In some cases, organizations set up dedicated project teams to implement "soft" projects. While this is fairly common in the public sector, it is rarer in the private sector.

Much more common for managing projects are the ad hoc project team. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, most organizations cannot afford to dedicate personnel to projects on a full-time basis. Secondly, many projects – if not most – are not big or complex enough to demand dedicated full-time management. With that said, there is usually just enough complexity to require cross-functional expertise and integration. In that case, the best approach is to create teams of individuals with functional expertise and responsibilities who meet on a regular basis to plan, develop and implement a project. When the approach is more formalized, it is often referred to as "matrix management", where each functional area of the organization is responsible in an explicit manner for a project function. On the other hand, any time an organization creates a cross-functional team under a single project manager, we can say that it has implemented an ad hoc approach to project management.

This leads to the second component: project leadership. This is perhaps the most overlooked aspect of project management. You can have all the fancy Gantt and CPM charts in the world,

but if the project manager can't lead people, then it is all for nothing. Effective project managers must be capable of leading and motivating ad hoc teams of experts and specialists from various departments and functional areas, each of which may have their own agenda or assumptions about project success. These skills are generic, which is why it is more important to select and develop the right leaders for projects, more than any technical aspects of the discipline.

Ad hoc project teams under good leadership can be highly effective and efficient at implementing initiatives. Whether it is for new product development or to introduce cultural change, project teams can be used to foster better internal communication, better focus on performance-based outcomes, faster development cycles, and less internal friction. This list is impressive, but this type of approach can require significant cultural and organizational change.

This is not something that can be implemented solely by the HR department without buy in from across the company or organization. HR does have a role to play, primarily in supporting the approach and, perhaps, providing some training. But the main initiative and leadership must come straight from the top. Consequently, the senior executive team should view themselves as a project team and start breaking down functional barriers themselves. It is quite normal for department heads to speak for their own, but the needs of the organization as a whole must come first. If they set the proper example, the chances that any ad hoc project teams that are set up will work are much higher.

All of this requires a dedicated effort at cultural change and organizational development. There may be a significant requirement for training and reallocation of personnel, although this would not necessarily be the case. The important thing is not to assume that everyone will automatically know what is required of them. These types of skills must be fostered through education and constant reinforcement, and may also require modifications to HR policies and practices.

On the other hand, project management and project teams are essentially an operational matter for any company or organization. They are the best way to convey the idea that it isn't "business as usual". Business processes must be examined and possibly modified to support the new approach. Needless to say, this may also have an impact on compensation and other aspects of performance management. With that said, the return on investment is potentially significant in terms of shorter decision and implementation cycles, greater cooperation, more focused allocation of resources, and better teamwork.