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Guest Bloggers

Val Matison
 CIO
 Info3

**GOT A
QUESTION?**

Project Management: Why Stupid Procedures Should Be Followed (Most of the Time) – Part 2/2

Earlier, I introduced DJ Dunkerley, a Business Analyst and Project Manager currently lending his expertise with Annex Consulting and working on a host of projects.

DJ has a two-part blog about Project Management. Here's part 2.

Part Two of Two: The Secret List

We draw on the pitcher to fill our glasses, and for some strange reason you are reminded of a scene in Revenge of the Sith with Anakin and Senator Palpatine. But you can follow your memory no further as the present discussion begins again:

Another good reason to follow procedures is a lot of time they allow people to form *abstractions* about what you are doing. And in a big organization it's important to have abstractions that mean the same thing to a wide body of people. This may come as a surprise to you, O great leader, but not everybody in org has the time to read your weekly updates or the energy to expend the effort to understand why your project is so unique and special. If you are following the procedure and not antagonizing (too) many people, then all is well with the world (meaning they won't block you and even perhaps release some resources to help you out). Don't underestimate how important it is to have solid abstractions in a large multi-national corporation. Let's see you have some procedures for rolling out a new product. You don't like the procedures? Fine, get on the phone to Brussels, Hong Kong, Tel Aviv, and Boston and tell everybody you're changing what beta means and early production doesn't include documentation because you think it's stupid to get stuff written at such an early stage. Let's see you get everybody to sign off on how you think it should be done, if not everybody agrees on what "it" means.

On the other hand, slavish obedience to every darn procedure that is drafted in head office is by no means a guarantee you'll get the project done. This is where experience comes into play. It can take years, years I tell you, to develop such powers of discernment that enable you to determine which procedures are crucial to follow and which can be safely ignored. Here is a rough guide:

1. All procedures laid out by salespeople should be followed. Sales guys hate procedures, absolutely loathe them. So if the sales office actually comes up with a procedure, you probably should be following it.
2. Procedures by your foreign branches should be followed. Even if the procedures seem really weird. Especially the weird ones.
3. Procedures by the budget team. This is a tricky one. If money for projects is flowing like a river and your company is doubling in size every years, you can oftentimes ignore them. But if money is tight and the rumour of cutbacks is making the rounds, then follow their procedures to the letter. Unless you really did want your budget cut.
4. Any procedure by a business analyst or a consultant can be safely ignored unless it's given a seal of approval by your boss or by somebody who your boss respects.
5. Customer services procedures can be safely ignored EXCEPT for those procedures recommended by those people who actually deal directly with customers. I'm not kidding, in every large company there are people in the customer service division who have never ever SEEN a customer. And these people are the worst at making up stuff that is just a pain to follow.
6. IT procedures. Find the guy who wrote the procedure and confront him. If he can defend it, then honour it. If he got the procedure out of a Dummies textbook, tell him to compromise or you'll start an insurrection.
7. Procedures by the datacenter people (SAP, Oracle, Peoplesoft): Follow them only if the data people give you resources so you CAN follow them. That is to say, the SAP guys should be given you face time with the database administrators to work the system to get what you need. Ditto with Oracle and Peoplesoft. If all they are doing is sending you e-mail with hyperlinks to undecipherable database GUIs, then you can safely ignore them. Because they are probably doing the same thing to your boss and bosses' boss, and as a result, everybody in the org hates them.
8. All procedures that release resources that enable a crucial task to be completed should be followed, no matter how stupid. Fight the good fight in the next life, not this one dummy.
9. If it will annoy your boss to not follow the procedure, then follow the procedure. James Dean could be a "Rebel Without a Cause" because he had tons of natural charisma and was incredibly good-looking. However, if you follow Dean's example, you will just come off as being just irritating.

In short, you gotta push the paper and kiss the rings of the various bureaucrats to get stuff out the door. Unless you're the CEO. And even them, I've seen at least one CEO slap his forehead when dealing with SAP.

The glasses are empty again. All is quiet at the table.

Hey! It's three dollar shooter night at the bar!

DJ Dunkerley
 Senior Product Development Professional
<http://lastdaysoftheloneranqr.blogspot.com/>

DJ, this is an interesting perspective to share with our audience.

Ok, now IT managers and pros--tell us your experiences and provide your comments...

Thank you,
 Stephen Ibaraki

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Comments**# re: Project Management: Why Stupid Procedures Should Be Followed (Most of the Time) - Part 2/2**

Tuesday, February 28, 2006 5:07 PM by [Graham Jones](#)

DJ has supplied some very erudite advice that I am sure we can all learn from. However, I have faced a number of situations where "following the well established procedures" would never have produced a positive result. DJ freely admits that not all procedures are sensible or good. Well, then sometimes they simply have to be changed. Those who like an easy life won't do it and those with a vested interest definitely won't do it! So who will do it? What DJ describes is learning to live within and how to use the "system", ie. what can be safely ignored.

If the system is flawed, should we just gnash our teeth, count to ten and get on with it or show some mettle and set about changing the system for the betterment of all? This may sound somewhat altruistic but sometimes it just has to be done. After all personal future and the future of the organization might just depend upon it.

Will you skin your knuckles in the process? Darn right you will. Will you risk your job in the process? Quite possibly. Will you be thanked for making things better? Don't count on it. Then why would we ever want to do it? Quite simply, if nobody did it then how would things ever get better? At times, frankly, I would much rather expend some energy in trying to improve the "system" than waste that energy trying to get around it with the attendant frustrations.

Rarely do the people at the top of the organization see how broken it is. PM's are often in a position to see the good and the bad because they have to interact with pretty much all parts of the organization. The PM's responsibility is to get the "job" done and sometimes this requires an "it is easier to get forgiven than get permission" attitude. I definitely do not recommend charging through the organization like a "bull in a china shop" either. As DJ rightly points out there is no substitute for experience.

Something that was not touched upon is the importance of the support of your team. Without that you are dead anyway regardless of the system. You will gain great respect from them by tackling those "procedures/issues" which frustrate them and do something about it. You will get the opposite if, in their eyes, you appear to excuse yourself on the basis that "the problem is insurmountable and the system is the system".

In my opinion the PM position is primary one of a Leader who uses just sufficient knowledge (too much knowledge or use of it makes you dangerous - "don't keep a dog and bark yourself") in the technology to communicate effectively with the team, the organization and the client. That is not to say that a PM does not need to be very familiar with the best practices of professional Project Management such as defined by the PMI for example, but it is primarily a "people" job. I have seen many projects and PM's fail because they either didn't understand that or lacked the necessary people skills.

My 2c worth!

Graham Jones

President, VANTUG

re: Project Management: Why Stupid Procedures Should Be Followed (Most of the Time) - Part 2/2

Wednesday, March 01, 2006 10:41 AM by [Stephen Ibaraki](#):
sibarak@cipcs.ca

Graham,

I like your points since it combines real-world experience of what works combined with certification and education. The triple threat in IT: experience based upon a foundation of certification and education.

Projects key on having the team on the same page and this relates to the people skills you talk. For my professional development career conference keynote, I received career tips from international notable experts and this was a common theme: people skills.

This also ties into the Gartner study on future job trends. 60% of IT jobs will be business-facing; 70% of leading-edge firms will hire versatilists who have business skills, relationships and collaboration abilities, core process knowledge, industry knowledge, and leadership skills. There will be a drop of 40% in specialist jobs. The common theme again is centered on people skills. And central to people skills is the ability to communicate, manage relationships and expectations. And, you must constantly maintain communications throughout this process. Communicate or Fail! I blogged on this earlier:
<http://blogs.technet.com/cdnitmanagers/archive/2006/02/24/420464.aspx>

Graham if you get a chance, share a story or two about your experiences illustrating the points you are making...

Thank you,
Stephen Ibaraki

re: Project Management: Why Stupid Procedures Should Be Followed (Most of the Time) - Part 2/2

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Friday, March 03, 2006 2:46 PM by Adam Cole

I thank you DJ for an excellent and very well written dissection of corporate procedures. You raise to the level of consciousness a problem which plagues us all. I personally find it helpful to be reminded of the benevolent origins of all procedures – you might even save me some hair.
