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of the Day

"A goal without a plan
is just a
wish."

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

French writer and aviator

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Five Fail-safe Ways to Get the *Most* Out of Your PMO

No doubt at this point in your career you've read countless articles, white papers, newsletters and blogs on the risks and failure rates associated with PMO's. Pundits on these matters - and there are many - routinely patter on about the importance of clear value propositions and sustaining leadership support, the varying benefits of a strategic versus tactical focus, and the pitfalls of unnecessary complexity and bureaucracy. Oddly enough, many of these same experts hold what can only be called an irrational fixation on PMO's as some sort of silver bullet: in the right hands and under the right conditions miraculous feats will occur and all problems will be solved.

The fact is that in the past decade countless PMO's were launched and embraced by business leaders throughout the world and subsequently failed. Many of these failures were followed by a second, third and fourth attempt until success was reached. Why is that? PMO's by definition address a core business competency. But, too frequently organizations first implement PMO's as an added cost with no clear product or service offering other than the 'right' way to do projects. Compounding this mistake they introduce 'professional' project managers who are not prepared to take on the role. It's time to evolve our thinking.

Here are five fail-safe strategies for getting the most out of your PMO:

#1 - Focus on getting work done and expanding that capability.

Most organizations are faced with late projects, budget overruns, scope creep, resource and funding conflicts and a troublesome lack of surety that they are doing the right projects. To be successful PMO's must get underneath these general problems in order to uncover the specific "critical-to-the-organization" needs that aren't being met. Listen carefully to your executives, managers, project sponsors and PMs. Use them to help you identify ways in which the PMO can partner with key departments and teams to close the work delivery gap. Support critical areas of the business in addressing work intake and execution issues. Make incremental improvements that speed project and portfolio decision-making and issue resolution. Develop practical first generation solutions for understanding capacity. Help your project managers to document critical project information, and, make the near term portfolio work visible to the organization. Doing these things and doing them well will inevitably lead to the PMO being viewed as a core support unit.

The bottom line: PPM initiatives and PMO's that aggressively address their organization's most pressing workload information and delivery needs - early and consistently - are those that succeed.

#2 - Stay out of the 'we are the project experts' trap.

No doubt, since its inception, your organization has successfully defined its portfolio and delivered projects. Portfolio and project management experts can enhance that capability but rarely do they introduce it. It's to your advantage to integrate new roles and job classifications such as portfolio, program and project manager into the organization thoughtfully. Work with project owners and sponsors, on a one-by-one basis if needed, to help define and implement these roles for maximum benefit to operations rather than project delivery. Introduce efficiencies into the existing work environment and in-flight projects by offering incremental practical enhancements rather than a slew of new processes, tools and systems. Keep in mind that the majority of project and portfolio management issues derive from general organizational issues. Avoid working in a project vacuum offering project relative expertise exclusive of operational solutions.

Project management and managers are vital to understanding what it takes to get project work done and keeping it on course. However, their expertise alone rarely fixes the problem. Work on building organization-wide capability to select and execute projects with a realistic understanding of capacity, Uncover and eliminate information and execution gaps that result in project staffing, funding, and physical resource contention. Work with the business to clearly define project value and scope.

The bottom line: You can't steamroll the organization into doing something they believe they're already doing with a team of 'project experts'. Nor can you expect them to do things differently overnight. PPM initiatives and PMO's that promote organization-wide project delivery expertise are those that become an operational necessity.

#3 - Infuse your PMO with business experts and analysts.

Provide business expertise and analytics, as opposed to relying solely on portfolio and project information, to help your organization select, prioritize and deliver work. A well-balanced PMO team includes experienced project managers, of course. But, it should also include operations, organizational change management and business analyst expertise. The integrated PMO team that is able to work from a position of business credibility is the team that will change the day.

Draw qualified staff with a mission of improving the organization's focus and delivery. Give them the authority to make real change. Continuously challenge them to prove their value.

Project management may be one of the services you offer and project managers some of the customers you support, but it is not the core product of PPM and PMO's. Addressing the business rather than project management problem with the help of seasoned business experts will significantly improve the way work is defined and prioritized and, the efficiency with which it is executed.

The bottom line: Your PPM initiative and PMO are operational efforts not the ultimate project about projects. Take on the business challenge with business experts. Support the organization with professional project managers. Set clear expectations for tangible improvements. Then let your PMO do what it was built to do: leverage the organization's innate drive to succeed.

#4 - Improved information and decision support at every level of your organization is "job one".

Organizations live or die by the decisions they make. On the other hand, PMO's live or die by the information they provide. At every level of your organization data abounds. Job one for PMO's is to turn data into clear information. This means capturing the facts and going beyond them - thoughtfully. Insightful analysis, transparent reporting, and clear communications and processes are primary attributes of the successful PMO. The result is improved decision speed and proactive issue and risk management at every level of the organization.

Make no assumptions about the quality of data and ensure its accuracy. There's an old saying: "figures don't lie, but liars figure". Make sure that you know what information is needed at every level of the organization. The PMO must partner with finance and operations to achieve improved organization-wide understanding of project value, priority, cost, risks, resource requirements and organizational capacity.

The bottom line: Your primary focus must be on providing information that offers insights and processes that support nimble decision-making. Communications is the Achilles heel of many business efforts and most PPM initiatives and PMO's. Make clarity and agility a top priority.

#5 - Refocus your strategies and roadmap your evolutionary path.

The evolution of PPM and a PMO is far from organic. It's as much a strategic as it is a tactical effort and just like any other business unit you need a solid business plan. A roadmap that guides your evolutionary path is essential. Consider outside help, if you need it. The investment you make in planning is directly relative to the level of success your organization will achieve.

Regularly ask yourself: What value is the PMO providing and where does it need to go next? Identify the right strategies for supporting work management efficiencies in your environment. Identify strategic partnerships to build, improvements to design and test, and most importantly document a roadmap for this long-term complex effort. Remember, it's not about introducing something new but always working to evolve and build upon existing competencies within your organization.

The bottom line: A comprehensive business plan and strategic roadmap are essential to initial PPM and PMO success. The ongoing refinement of that plan, based upon asking the right questions, is what turns a PMO into an essential business unit.

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