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Taming the man-eaters trying to destroy project management

IT-Rex and the Jurassic Project

BY ANDREW CHALMERS

Project management (PM) is more than just keeping all the timelines and paperwork in order. It also means keeping a constant guard and killing any unexpected IT-Rexes that manage to break out of their cages.

"While the ways that projects are being used within organizations change, the practice of project management itself has evolved," says Chip Nickolet, president of Comprehensive Consulting Solutions. (Brookfield, Wisc.), who has killed off more than his share of ugly creatures threatening to wreck IT operations. "Not only must the current business criteria be taken into account, but future growth and expansion, shifts in technology and customer needs, and the ever-increasing globalization of business must be addressed in solving any problem."

Of course, any evolutionary path involves a lot of mistakes along the way. Organisms and organizations either adapt or become extinct. So to help your own projects progress to higher life forms rather than go the way of the dinosaurs, let's look at some of the problems encountered by others involved in project management and the lessons they should have learned. (Names have been removed to avoid embarrassing the parties involved.)

The butler didn't do it

Everything was proceeding according to schedule. The Windows 2000 migration had been successfully modeled on a test network. A pilot W2K domain with several thousand users had been operating for months. New servers and EMC storage units were being installed. It was almost time to fire up the new equipment and move 8000 users over to Windows 2000 and Active Directory. Then, like in a low-budget horror movie, in the middle of the night the lights suddenly went out and in the darkness they found something dead.

But it wasn't the butler who did it, it was the janitor. The corpse? A burned out transformer. The IT department knew it had ample amperage allocated to cover all its new equipment, so did some sleuthing to uncover the guilty party. Who was the culprit?

Over the past five or six years, unknown to IT, the engineering department had added a robotics and a high-voltage laboratory. Capacity was stretched to the point where, when a janitor plugged in a vacuum, it brought down the entire wing. Several months later, after spending \$300,000 for a new transformer and a backup generator for the Network Operations Center, the project could again start moving forward.

"Projects do not operate in a vacuum," says Nickolet. "You always need to look around and see what other parts of the organization are affected by, or can affect, what you are trying to accomplish."

The territorial imperative

Watch out. People bite. Particularly when guarding their own territory. Bear that in mind in project management or you

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could suffer the same fate as this example: When two entities decided to combine their IT resources and eliminate millions of dollars in redundancy, they brought in a consulting firm to devise a plan for the merger. The consultants spent a year working on it but then only laid out in broad strokes how it would occur. Lacking clear, exact, well-defined actions to take, and an active project manager to guide the integration, the project bogged. Instead of ushering in a new era of cooperation, it soon devolved into a dead end filled with recriminations hurled by both sides.

Several years later, the project hadn't materialized, the same old IT systems were running and all the money allocated had been eaten up in legal bills. Lesson learned: Don't ever expect to get two packs of wild beasts to work together without a skilled tamer who knows never to show the slightest hint of fear.

Starstruck

People frequently complain that no one ever notices the work they do. But sometimes you can receive too much attention. That was the case of one large municipality entity when it put in a PeopleSoft ERP/procurement program. With employees in 600 buildings managing the purchasing for each department's individual needs, there was clearly a case for streamlining operations and obtaining discounts through bulk purchasing.

When the multi-million dollar project went live it garnered plenty of press attention, but all of the wrong kind. For weeks newspapers ran stories blaming it for problems such as police officers unable to issue citations because they ran out of ticket books. While the media did exaggerate the trouble a bit, it was also true that the implementation was not going smoothly.

As it turned out, however, the problem did not lie with the new software, as the press stated. Most of the difficulties were simply due to the usual resistance to change. But there was also an underlying situation that the project was running smack into.

Software is excellent for enforcing existing policies and procedures, and that is how this system was designed. One of those policies stated that no checks could be written without an approved purchase order. But for years staff had ignored that policy. The old paper-based system which required approval from the central office was far too slow, so people had devised shortcuts to speed payments to vendors. Once the PeopleSoft system went live, it threw off all the established shortcuts and vendors stopped getting their checks on time.

"Software alone cannot solve problems with processes," says Nickolett. "You have to examine the way people are actually doing things, not just the ways they should be doing them, in order to devise a workable project."

No, it's fine to have a celebration once you have completed a major project, just don't do it too early. One organization did just that when it put in a new SAP ERP system as part of its Y2K upgrades. Plenty of people worked on the project initially — 60 internal staff assigned to the project, 20 consultants hired, an executive steering committee to grease the lines. But after 16 months, the system went live and the bulk of the team members were ordered to return to their regular duties which had languished during their absence (Budgetary constrictions barred hiring new employees to replace them while on the project.)

A handful remained behind to manage the "post-implementation" phase. Wrong action. It was like sending one person out with a shotgun to fend off a trio of velociraptors. You just know he's going to get eaten alive. And that is exactly what happened in this case.

The complex, multifaceted implementation involved 700

business processes, 1400 transaction processes, 100 sites, 29 different labor unions and 13,000 employees. The 1100 users were only partially trained on the new systems. The project members left on the job put in up to 80 hours a week for the next year scrambling to get everything working right.

So, don't let your guard down too soon. As anyone knows from watching the movies, there is always one last attack in the final minutes after everyone thinks they are safe. The project isn't over once the software is working, but once the end users are successfully using it to enhance their productivity. Once that is achieved, go ahead and break out the bubbly!

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