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unconventional consulting

SEEING THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES

Keeping Projects On Track in Highly-Technical Environments

Projects in highly-technical environments are often made up of individuals who have specialized skills and competencies thanks to years of experience and education. Experts in fields like science, finance, and high-tech can be very analytical, enjoy rigorous debate, and immerse themselves in the details of finding solutions.

Despite this wealth of skills and knowledge, leaders in highly-technical environments may find their projects derailing. The analytical bent of the project team can make it hard to see the big picture. Their penchant for debate can delay progress. And they do not always consider the changes needed to implement their solutions. Yet, the demand for successful outcomes in these environments is always present.

Only 58 percent of organizations understand the importance of project management. And half of projects fail in organizations that do not view project management as a strategic competency.

Source: Project Management Institute (PMI), 2018

Organizations pay the price of poor project management. It can cause delays, scope creep, results below expectations—and even failure. In fact, **PMI reports that nearly 10 percent of every dollar is wasted on poor project performance.** These problems multiply in government due to legacy issues, cross-agency stakeholders and a lack of business incentives.

There is a better way. The key to a successful project in these situations is to let highly-technical people focus on their unique strengths and expertise by surrounding them with a comprehensive and complementary approach that goes beyond traditional project management.



3 WAYS TO KEEP PROJECTS ON TRACK IN HIGHLY-TECHNICAL ENVIRONMENTS

1 PAIR TECHNICAL LEADS WITH A SKILLED PROJECT MANAGER

Project leads are often selected based on their technical acumen, not on their ability to manage a milestone-driven project. As a result, critical management functions are often neglected. With a technical lead and a skilled project manager working together and contributing their specialized expertise and strengths, agencies get the best of both worlds—a subject matter guru and a project ninja. Skilled project managers are more than coordinators. They have a unique and valuable ability to pivot between the big picture and the details. They can oversee development, align roles and responsibilities, and develop their teams. They can also recognize the warning signs of project jeopardy early and course correct before irreparable problems arise.

2 SIMPLIFY CONSENSUS BUILDING PROCESSES

A project manager can also facilitate consensus building, which may be a long process for highly-technical people who feel like they must solicit feedback from their peers. Resistance from even one stakeholder can derail things quickly. Technical leaders need to let go of “more is better” mentalities. This involves narrowing the stakeholder group, getting buy-in once at the right time, and understanding that 100 percent agreement is not the goal. Instead, the goal is to embrace the 80/20 rule and find opportunities to compromise. Collaboration and consensus building will always be part of projects, and successful teams keep their “eyes on the prize” to deliver intended outcomes.

3 EVOLVE MINDSETS TO EMPHASIZE CHANGE

Every project is a change initiative, and it is important to recognize this from the beginning and have someone on the team who knows how to manage change. Change also always comes with a steep learning curve. Easing people through it is non-negotiable for project success. A skilled project manager complements a highly technical individuals’ natural focus on content by monitoring the change needed to bring each project to life – namely, who is impacted by the change, how are they going to be impacted and what can be infused into the project to help prepare them for the change.

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