

Need a Breakthrough?

Get ready to involve the »powerhouse«, manage decisions and create the future

According to surveys, only 15 to 30 percent of projects succeed. Strategies and concepts are elaborated but the realization seems to be a lot more difficult. We have identified three steps to create a shift towards a better turnover.

by Frank Kühn, Birgitta Gregor and Jan Sølvsberg

Focus on clarity, decision and execution

Our Think Tank Project Management has experienced three crucial aspects that make a difference. Clarity means a better understanding. Dialog about what is happening and needed in the project, about meaning and progress. Ambitions, emotions, politics and power play. The second aspect is decision-making. Explicit decisions are needed during the course of the project, made by the right people, having the knowledge and intuition, authority and power. Or a clear decision to end the project, at the appropriate time. And finally: execution. Many decisions are not carried out due to lack of communication or missing commitment.

»We haven't actually had project failures. Our decisions can mean: it's good to stop a project here, because it's not worthwhile. Or: it's good to take a different route, because we are more experienced now. That is not failure; that is making decisions at the right time. Once we have made the decisions, we implement them. Or we receive feedback that the implementation will not succeed in this way. Rapid escalation is important to us, and then again decision-making. That requires a positive feedback culture; you have to continuously work on that.«

Dr. Werner Przybilla, Global PSR Operational Excellence Leader, MOMENTIVE ►



What has proven to be helpful is a review of the decision-making process, from project initiative to project close-out. What key decisions to postpone a project, or to prioritize a technical solution, are typically being delayed or avoided? What are our decision-making habits and those of the key people?

Involve the project environment

The first step is to understand the »big picture« with all the influential actors in the project environment, the relationships among them, their different roles in influencing the project. Some may actively promote the project, others may »sabotage« the entire project process. Whom will you need to reach your goals? Involve them in the project, along with their accountabilities and ownerships, ambitions and competencies, contradictions and conflicts. Rely on trust and accountability, using flexible, appropriate forms of cooperation from exchanging information to setting up working groups or building strategic alliances. Sharing data, opinions, concerns or experiences, no matter how far apart they might be, can start a process of involvement and keep it going.

»We launched a complex international project with a pre-kick-off workshop that involved key stakeholders. We asked them what – from their point of view – would be crucial to turn the project into a success story. As a result, we got highly valuable hints and insights, as well as a management commitment that we hadn't expected that explicitly. Finally, the project did really become a success story.«

Peter Wollmann, Head of BU Project Portfolio Management, ZURICH Group Germany

Projects are not only a number of technical activities, but also a sequence of communication needs, opportunities and experiences. This does not mean turning the project into a talkshow, but observing and monitoring closely what is going on, sensing and understanding the project's dynamics and applying the right measure of interventions.

See projects as pioneers

Future-fit organizations accept the business world's rhythm and volatility. Project management is the ideal pioneer and role-model for this.

»We started a global project management offensive, followed by a Leadership Development Program that also integrated project management. We achieved a considerable boost for our collaboration, our projects, our leadership capabilities, our change readiness and resilience. This also has proven to be crucial in managing our current merger.«

Dr. Harald Ring, Vice President Human Resources, RÜTGERS Holding Germany

With links to Lean and Kanban, the software industry has developed a framework for managing software projects called Scrum. The Scrum methodology gives one good example of a different kind of project management, with principles for the future organization. Scrum accepts the priority of time, and it delivers working solutions within two weeks. Not the extensive ones that constantly need more capacities and time and, at the end, deliver fragments and frustration. Neither with pushy project owners and desperate teams, but with functionalities clearly ranked. With teams, who make the decision what items they will be able to deliver on time, by self-managing the sprint needed to keep their promises. Hierarchical attitudes conflict with this approach, even sabotage is reported. That is why such developments require mindful interaction between project management and corporate development, discussing and committing on principles that reflect the new challenges. Here are three examples:

- Care for purpose and meaning rather than precise target descriptions: If the (project) staff is well informed, enabled and empowered they will go the right way and deliver the accurate result on time.
- Don't follow a plan because it is a plan: Let us not fight for our blueprint »babies«, but pace with the dynamics around the project, with joint awareness and flexibility rather than seeking assurance via perfect planning.
- Priority of time over content: We all are facing tons of content and information but limited time and resources. Accept this fact and create inspiring collaboration opportunities for high impact.

Finally, how to create a new, powerful project management? Let us communicate and share ideas on the challenge together with peers, colleagues, experts. We will see how a joint initiative will emerge and grow. Love the outcome for its quality and acceptance, even if it is not your personal favourite one. ●