Getting Results in a Project World

BY ED HOFFMAN

One issue has emerged as a common concern in my recent discussions with project practitioners representing a broad cross-section of public and private sector interests around the world. Are project failures increasing? Is some vital component of good project execution missing? This concern is not surprising. It is reinforced by the Katrina tragedy, by failed Iraq War construction projects, by falling debris hitting cars in the Boston Big Dig, and by delays in fulfilling orders for the new Airbus super jumbo jet.

American project managers in particular possess a reputation for getting it done, and rightfully so. After all, our know-how and technology got us to the moon and back several times. They will get us back to the moon, permanently this time, and then on to Mars and beyond. But recent failures raise nagging questions about why so many project teams have not succeeded.

This is not to say failures cannot eventually become huge successes. We forget the flawed mirror in the Hubble when we marvel at the magnificent images of our wondrous universe it produces. Our memories of the first buggy Internet Explorer browser fade when we use the current fabulous multimedia-capable version of the software. The best teacher is failure, if the right lessons are captured and absorbed by individuals and organizations. But I wonder if the current publicized project failures could cluster around some powerful issues that are often neglected?

Of course, there are some well-known components of successful execution, including accurate requirements, good planning, risk management, adequate resources, and talented and committed personnel. But I think there are other critical conditions for project success that are seldom acknowledged and therefore rarely attained.

First, projects need to be intricately and actively tied to the organization's overall strategy and reviewed and debated frequently by leaders and practitioners to assess their relevance. Too often, projects operate in isolation, focused on a narrowly defined set of milestones that ultimately fail to connect with interrelated activities and objectives. As a result, they neither support nor benefit from that wider context. Second, the execution of required activities and processes often falls short of what is needed. Lack of clarity about objectives, specified activities, and accountability means that the focus on executing the organizational strategy will eventually diminish, even though everybody is working long and hard hours. Finally, open communication and transparency are critical for project success, sustaining commitment and follow-through by practitioners who truly embrace the goals.

One reason I continue to believe in our efforts at *ASK Magazine* is that they allow practitioners to communicate project knowledge across diverse organizations and help to connect project teams with the broader organizational context.

One more point: As I continue to talk to practitioners and visit a wide range of projects in many organizations, I'm more and more convinced that good leadership is a non-negotiable component of success. Only excellent leaders can ensure that the issues I've raised are effectively addressed. ●