



Well on Our Way

A couple of years ago, I was sitting in my office talking with my Deputy Director Tony Maturo. We were in a contemplative mood, discussing NASA's then-recent run of prominent project failures

I INDICATED THAT IF THE ACADEMY OF PROGRAM AND PROJECT Leadership (APPL) was going to significantly improve program and project management at NASA, we needed to expand our portfolio of services, including resources that go directly to the project. “We need to be sending experts to the projects, experienced project practitioners, who can respond to the needs of the project manager,” I said.

Tony smiled and said, “Okay, I know where you’re going with this. But if we do what you want, we need to do it right. I don’t want us to offer willy-nilly, do-what-you-want, feel-good stuff that costs a lot and makes absolutely no difference to a project.”

I laughed because I knew exactly what he meant. I related a story of mine from nearly twenty years earlier:

In the mid-80s, I was responsible for providing organizational development support to NASA project teams. I was preparing to work with a new team and was conducting general interviews of the “what is working, what is not” variety. A young woman seemed nervous about an upcoming retreat, and I asked about her concern. She blushed and asked me, “When we’re at the retreat, will we have to talk to a banana?” I had been prepared for many things in my doctoral program at Columbia University, but they never told me how to respond to the banana question.

She was serious. At a previous retreat, the facilitator had her team talking to bananas: “Speak to the banana as you would a new person joining the team...”

Tony laughed at the story and said, “Exactly; if we’re going to support project teams, let’s do it in a way that makes a clear difference.”

While a training director in the Navy, Tony had been responsible for establishing rapid response support capability. His successful experience then provided us with many lessons that we could use in our current situation.

We outlined how we wanted to do this: First, we would gather a team of expert practitioners with top-gun status. I’m talking about experts with the ability to address all aspects of a project during any phase in its lifecycle. Second, we would work only to improve project capability and competence—we were not going to supplement project staffing. Third, we would show we were serious by responding within 48 hours to any request for our support and by following through on requests only when the project manager and team were committed to change.

Moreover, we didn’t want to impose another layer of bureaucracy on projects, so we needed to establish simple procedures for obtaining our support. We also felt we had to measure project improvement in real terms, with data that could stand up to scientific scrutiny.

That was the foundation for APPL’s Performance Enhancement business line, which presently accounts for just over half of all APPL business. Entering 2004, we were supporting 29 program and project teams in such areas as program control, project planning and scheduling, systems management, risk management, project leadership, and culture/team improvement. Each project has been tracked with specific measures to indicate the value of our support. I have seen the initial measures and we will soon be unveiling findings indicating statistically significant improvements that should lead to wider discussions of how to develop and improve project teams and individuals.

It is exciting and gratifying to see and hear the reaction of the NASA project community who has used these services. Based on customer reaction, increasing demand, and measurement of results, I think we’re well on our way to improving project management at NASA.

And no one has to talk to a banana. •