

Business as usual - 2



The Xpragmatic View #96
February 17, 2008
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Every behavioural change is difficult, especially when we have the luxury of choice. As a result, self-controlled behavioural change is one of the main reasons for the failure of business initiatives. Is there anything we can do about it?

Project management in the 21st century

So, after our quiet start last month, 2008 is now fully on the road. Since the end of last month, we are participating in a new project that will run until the end of this year. At least, the request for proposal told us so.

This project is an ambitious pan-European initiative with some 20 participating countries. Our project team consists of three different organisations, not taking into account the individual entrepreneurs, like us, who act as subcontractors and also run their own little shop. We have seven nationalities on board. Two members are professors; four other members have a doctoral degree. All members are experts in their field of expertise and have a broad experience in the specific domains of their requested involvement. We use a state-of-the-art Internet collaboration platform. Failure is not an option.

Why would we fail?

Well, perhaps because a simple reality is that the majority of projects fail one way or another. Years ago, we already wrote a View titled "[Business as usual](#)" where we discussed our poor track record of managing projects successfully.

Ok, that was 1999, is it any different today?

We don't think so. Decades of improving project management skills and awareness creation still do not pay off. In our present case:

- This is a strict-timeline project, but the 'go' was already given one month late. Without changing the expected end date of the project of course.
- The kick-off meeting took place the day after the project was formally awarded. At that moment, not a single contract was signed between the participating parties and the discussion on the final deliverables was still open.
- In order to make this a success, the first month is crucial. Unfortunately, the key person for this is now on holiday in Spain.

Didn't we hear this before?

Now, this type of observation is not limited to aspects of project management. More in general, it is the manifestation of a problem that we call "avoidable behavioural change".

Avoidable behavioural change

Now, that seems quite a mouthful, but in reality, it is quite simple. Avoidable behavioural changes are all these moments in our life when we know that there is a need to adjust the way we are doing things and that we have the luxury of indeed deciding to do so. However, finally, we don't.

A typical example of this is the so-called "student syndrome". At the end of the year, the student knows he/she has to adjust the day-to-day scheme of having fun, going out and doing interesting stuff. Instead he/she has to prepare for the final exams. So, the student draws a nice scheme of what has to be done, how much time is left to do so and prepares a nice work schedule. But then, at the first day of the schedule, there are a thousand reasons to postpone the work to be done. Still enough time, no need to hurry, this schedule is really flexible... And so it goes on the next day, and the day after, and...

We all have lived this.

Same as for the student, the avoidable behavioural change problem is one of the main reasons for project failure and for many other things in our daily business life that we might not be aware of.

As an example, in a recent post on his [Transparent Office](#) blog, Michael Idinopulos wrote about an interesting observation regarding the adoption of new concepts or technologies such as wikis.

According to Michael, the adoption of such new concept will be determined by the fact whether the use of such new technology or concept is "In-the-Flow" versus "Above-the-Flow".

As he writes:

*In-the-Flow wikis enable people do their day-to-day work in the wiki itself. These wikis are typically replacing email, virtual team rooms, and project management systems.
Above-the-Flow wikis invite users to step out of the daily flow of work and reflect, codify, and share something about what they do. These wikis are typically replacing knowledge management systems (or creating knowledge management systems for the first time).*

As Michael writes, the adoption of new approaches in an "In-the-Flow" context is in general rather straightforward. It essentially changes "how" you do certain things, but "what" you do essentially stays the same.

However, the success of "Above-the-Flow" initiatives is far more questionable. Here, there is no business as usual. Instead, people are asked to make choices, to take initiative, to decide themselves what to contribute or not. It is a typical situation of avoidable behavioural change.

Avoidable behavioural change is a great luxury to have, but apparently very difficult to use. The failure of most knowledge management initiatives is another typical example of this.

In theory, Above-the-Flow seems to be the place where we want to be. However, once there, we drift apart in randomness.

At least, when we are in a business context. Maybe the problem is not our avoidable behavioural change capability, but rather the business context we work in?

Denial is always the first phase.

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