81 { Using a project-based approach to change: too much of a good thing?

"To succeed we'll need everyone to be more intuitive and creative…"

"Great! Let's set up a 'creativity' project plan with five levels of mandated 'intuition' milestones!"

Intuitively we know that screaming at the children to keep the noise down is pointless. It grates. It sends mixed messages. The method is at odds with the outcome we are trying to achieve. Yet in this Lucid Thought we reflect that these considerations are rarely applied to how we bring about desired change in our organisations. Project and programme management are often used as the default options for all sorts of initiatives. **Sometimes there is alignment and project and programme management supports the change process effectively. In other cases it inadvertently engenders apathy or resistance.** Maybe the Shakespearian question – 'can one desire too much of a good thing?' applies here?

We have been studying a European bank that has been transforming itself over the last 5 years. From a traditional branch-based bank; it is becoming a modern, integrated banking operation comprising a new branch format, highly professionalised call centres and state-of-the-art internet banking. The combination of "Face, Call and Click" has already generated significant increases in market share and profitability.

As the transformational vision was forming, **the senior management team realised that the organisation did not have the necessary discipline and maturity to define, coordinate and deliver the desired change, given its scale and complexity.** A Programme Director was recruited to sit on the Management Board and to run the Transformation Programme, leading a small team of experienced change professionals. **The Management Board introduced and strictly enforces formal project and programme management approaches.** Each project has to have a business case which articulates a clear rationale for the project and is underpinned by thorough and comprehensive plans. Monitoring is intense and governance is detailed and, at times, ruthless. Anticipated benefits are incorporated into operating budgets, tracked rigorously and used to fund future projects.

The new operating model transfers many banking functions to customers, from self-service cash transactions using ATMs in the branches to managing their accounts on-line. These changes have demanded far greater accuracy, standardisation, process efficiency and execution discipline to achieve the targeted "straight-through processing" and "zero touch". The metaphor used to describe the banking operation of the future is "the planned machine". The Transformation Programme is not only the vehicle for creating a more prescribed and "industrialised" way of working within the branches and the central functions, it also models this new way of working through its formal processes

and strict governance. **The complete alignment of the method and desired outcome is seen by the managers to have been a key plank in the success of the transformation to date.**

In describing project management as a discipline, we evoke order, structure, control, conformity and predictability. **Discipline is at the heart of what is widely regarded as 'good' project management practice.** It delivers results. Screaming at the children to keep the noise down usually delivers the intended results as well – at least in the short term.

However, if the change we want to bring about is to 'de-bureaucratise' our organisation - fostering ideas such as like engagement, empowerment, risk-taking, innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity – then we wonder if project, and even programme, management may be ill suited to the task? Using a project-based approach to planned change inherently contains some degree of bureaucracy. It reinforces formal hierarchy over consensus, mandate over initiative, boundaries over fluidity, roles over mutual adaptation, structure over flexibility. **A project-approach favours the rational over the intuitive, analysis over insight, planning over adapting, execution over experimentation.** As an overarching approach, a project, programme or portfolio management framework risks snuffing out the very empowerment and creativity it is meant to foster. People hear the rhetoric, then experience the subtle constraints and implicit rules, and, soon, many may give up trying to change.

The bank we are studying is beginning to experience resistance to what insiders perceive as excessive bureaucracy. It may be excessive, or it may be the 'old guard' fighting back or the deeply rooted corporate culture re-asserting itself. But, it is has made us pause for thought as we observe our client doing the same. Having instilled core disciplines and processes, how does the senior management team sustain future growth? More of the same seems neither feasible nor desirable.

Project and programme management may be necessary to create underpinning capabilities, be they information systems or production facilities, and may be normal practice in some parts of an organisation. Yet, **when projects and programmes interact with, and usually impose themselves on, other parts of an organisation they send out clear, though usually unintended, signals.**

Our reflections on this client assignment, and others we are currently engaged with, have made us think about **how we become more sensitive to how our implementation methods are interpreted and related with our stated outcomes.** What are the unintended consequences of some of our attempts to plan and control? Our chosen methods can never be neutral. We propose we should think more carefully about where aspects of a project approach make most sense in a particular situation - and where aspects of what we do might grate and be 'too much of a good thing!'

Ruth Murray-Webster, Sergio Pellegrinelli & Peter Simon

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