

Project Management: Claptrap or Messy Work

By Hal Macomber

The question, “What is project management?” is like other on-the-mark unanswerable questions, “Where does the sun go at night?” and “What is reality? And why?” The questions are interesting in themselves. The answers, at one time or another, spawn fanatical arguments. That we don’t have a concise answer may explain why so many projects fail and project managers want to change careers.

I’ve found one of the best of the new definitions of project management. Mark Mullaly offers his new definition in [Project Management: A New Definition](#), appearing in Gantthead, July 23, 2003.

The exercise of responsibility and decision-making about a project, the authority to execute within the boundaries of the project, and the accountability to deliver the results of a project in the context of agreed-upon customer expectations, commitments and constraints.

Mullaly goes on to say,

(M)any with project management responsibility do not in fact realize that they are project managers...and many who believe themselves to be project managers may in fact not be fully exercising the role...We should not be held accountable for results if we do not have the responsibility to make decisions about a project or the authority to attain results.

Is this new? helpful? Hasn't this been said by every management expert on the face of the earth? Is it new to say this about or to project managers? I don't think so. Nor do I think the definition offers much guidance on how to carry out ones role. Sorry Mark, just more claptrap. In all fairness to Mullaly, many other people have offered far worse definitions.

Let’s try on something all together different. Fernando Flores offered a distinctive notion of management in his PhD dissertation *Communication and Management in the Office of the Future*, Univ. of California Berkeley, 1982.

Management is that process of openness, listening, and eliciting commitments, which includes a concern for the articulation and activation of the network of commitments, primarily produced through promises and requests, allowing for the autonomy of the productive units.

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While Flores was writing about the office of the future he foresaw that a principal activity was the managing of projects. That notion of management offered in 1982 fits the current day situation of projects. Flores pinpoints three issues in his definition that we continue to struggle against.

1. We continue viewing managing in the illusion that there are optima to be discovered. We labor under making the best decision -- certainty -- versus making good decisions -- clarity. The pursuit of certainty over clarity bogs down the project. Further, we act like those furthest from the action -- the smart ones -- are best able to decide. This is in stark contrast to Flores' notion of managing as openness, listening, and eliciting commitments.
2. What is our continuing preoccupation for being in charge? Someone is needed to make big commitments for the organization and the team. The problem is mistaking that responsibility for making so many other choices and decisions that *one someone* is not in the position to make. Flores describes the role as providing systems and practices for others to take charge (articulating and activating the network of commitments).
3. We fail to acknowledge and respect the autonomy of the productive units -- other human beings. In the project setting, as in all life today, workers are not the slaves to some master. 20 years after Flores called attention to our autonomy, we continue to act like this: managers decide, others do. Not only have people rejected that, they have access to the always-on ever-connected Internet which provides ready alternatives for anyone with the slightest itch to get out from under.

Here are three more issues:

4. Current wisdom (fascination or fad) places ever-more weight on process. That is a bureaucrat's approach that will only bring down the level of performance on projects. Projects are not production lines. There isn't one process to be used across all projects. Adhering to a process is a strait-jacket on innovation and improvisation necessary for projects to succeed.
5. We continue to plan our projects to determine an outcome rather than embrace the uncertainty of our world. How many times do we need to learn the lesson that the best laid plans are only a rehearsal for action. It's true on the battlefield, the football field, and on the project field. The separation of execution from planning will only result in failed project efforts.
6. We act with the (unacknowledged) confidence that we know our situations rather than acting with the humility of our ever-blindness to the whole of the situation. Not only are two smarter than one, and three are smarter than two, but three in cooperation will discern what fewer cannot discern. (The Blind Men and the Elephant, Mastering Project Work, by David Schmaltz, 2003)

Project management is messy work. People make it so. Ain't that grand? While some projects might involve engineering or problem-solving, they might entail great amounts of physical labor, material and equipment, or they might entail challenges of design and

innovation, what we know about all projects is they take people...people who are unpredictable, illogical, moody, creative, ambitious, and distracted - clever, insightful, persistent, logical, reflective, with a history, courageous, focused and finding a new way. Downright messy.

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Preparing for Messy Work

1. **(Re)Commit to the promise of the project.**
Be clear what you stand for. Continue to enroll your team throughout the duration of the project. As the situation changes you will likely change some elements of your promise(s).
2. **Establish clear practices for communication.**
Projects at the operative level are networks of commitments. Some of those commitments are described in advance in project schedule while many more will arise in the course of the unfolding of the project. Coordinating well is as much a function of communication practice as it is individual competence.
3. **Share responsibility for assessing the state of the project.**
The best of current project controls are rearview mirrors on project events. By sharing the promise and context of the project with all project performers they will be in the position to notice, assess, and make adjustments while they go about their work. This has the effect of keeping the project on course rather than needing to correct for falling off course sometime in the future.
4. **Establish routines for learning and innovating.**
We can't predict the future. And, the team we have two months from now is a smarter and more able team than when we began. Adopt practices for cultivating learning, sharing, and innovation throughout the project.
5. **Emphasize listening.**
Consultants will tell you the solutions they offer are already in the organization. Managers don't know about the solutions because they don't listen or people have stopped talking. The same is true on projects. The diversity of talent, experience, and perspective on projects is enough to take on most challenges. Create the setting for listening.