



Establishing Project Management Best Practices

Author: Gina Abudi, MBA, Partner/VP Peak Performance Group, Inc.

In the last few months, in meetings with a variety of clients, I have seen an increased desire to establish best practices around project management. However, with each client – “best practices around project management” seems to mean something different. For some clients, discussion has focused around putting policies and procedures in place for accomplishing projects. While other clients think of best practices as a means of ensuring that everyone is using the same terminology and templates and is better trained in project management technical skills. For yet another client, it was important to “get a handle on this project management thing.”

Given today’s economy, the focus for many organizations, especially around project management, is on doing more with less: shorter deadlines, tighter budgets, reduced human resources, and general uncertainty in what is going on in the organization overall. For some organizations, slashing projects is not out of the ordinary in these times, even some projects that are considered strategic in helping the organization move forward.

When organizations look at developing a “best practice” around the project management function, they usually mean one or more of the following:

- Standardized processes
- Standardized tools and templates
- Standardized software
- Development of competencies
- Assessment of skills against those competencies
- Effective resource planning
- Development of specialized career paths
- Development of strategic, long term training plans
- Development of formalized mentoring and coaching plans
- Support for and promotion of industry certification
- Development and roll out of a PMO function

Their main question, “Where do I start??”

In a conversation with a new lead project manager at an organization who was hired to “get a handle on project management,” he mentioned to me that the last three people didn’t work out, and he was wondering why. In attempting to understand the points of failure of his predecessors, it became apparent based on conversations that the last three lead project managers went into the organization “guns a’ blazing” to establish a PMO, along with standardization of processes, tools and templates.



This is an organization with nearly 100 project managers who, without a doubt, have processes in place for how they manage projects – whether formal (known and practiced by other project managers in the organization) or informal (known by the project manager him/herself and used regularly.) The last three individuals in the role made the wrong assumptions that there were no processes in place and they believed that they had the authority to enforce their agenda. While this may be the case, any good leader in an organization cannot force change without getting buy-in – even from their subordinates – in order to be successful. Their major problem - their approach was all wrong and was set up to fail.

Remember, key in establishing standards, whether around project management or any other function, is to get buy-in and consensus to ensure success. In this example, the new lead project manager will want to get to know how the project teams currently work on projects – what processes (formal and informal), tools, templates, standards are currently utilized now? How has it helped the success of the projects? Who else is using these methods of getting things done on their projects? Who have they shared their information with? Some sleuthing and data gathering is necessary here. I bet there are numerous processes in place throughout the organization – likely they just aren't written down and formalized within the organization. The “owners” of the processes are your champions for standards within the organization. You need their buy-in for the success of your endeavor – which is to put organization-wide standards in place around the project management function. And don't forget – these individuals have valuable information that can jump start what you are trying to do.

So...how do you start? In a nutshell...

Step 1: Do a bit of research within the organization as to how projects are getting done now. Get out there and talk to some of the project managers and project team members.

Step 2: Gather all the data you have found – look for similarities/marked differences. Get all of the process “owners” together to share information with each other and discuss their approaches.

Step 3: Document the conversation and meetings with the process “owners” based on their discussions: what works/what doesn't work, what agreement has been reached on sharing processes and making a standard from what already exists, what are next steps in bringing it all together to develop an organization-wide standard.

Step 4: Bring the rest of the organization into the loop - share the current processes in place, acknowledging the “owners” of the processes and highlighting how successful they been on projects because of their processes they have put in place. Then, discuss how standards may be developed organization-wide using a composition of processes already developed and being successfully implemented and filling in the gaps with new processes where needed.



Step 5: Think about how to incorporate industry best practices – such as the Project Management Institute’s Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®) and/or APM Group’s PRINCE2™ Methodology with the organization’s standards.

The key in all of this is communicating throughout the organization. Share your knowledge and your long term goals, but most of all, listen and learn from others. You need them to be successful in implementing your goals.