Where There's a Wall, There's a Way!
Achieving Group Consensus
By Bill Flury

Introduction

When I was beginning to learn how to be a good systems engineer, my mentor gave me some advice that has served me well. He told me, "Never try to solve a big problem on a small sheet of paper. Some problems just won't fit on 8.5 x 11." It turns out that this is true.

As an exercise in a class on project development life cycles, I asked everyone to draw a simple sketch – just five to seven blocks – indicating the major steps in their project life cycles. The results, as expected, were somewhat similar but there were significant differences among them. When we compared diagrams, we found different steps, different nomenclature and different understandings of the tasks involved in each of the blocks.

The class members were all from the same organization. The organization had a printed description of its approved standard life cycle and had mandated its use on all projects. In addition, all of the participants in this class experienced the same training, which instructed them in the application and use of the standard life cycle.

So, how did this happen? Why was there so much variation in their exercise answers? As we discussed that question, several interesting points emerged.

Common Themes

First, and most amazing, was the fact that they all thought that they were following the standard. They all claimed to have planned their projects in accordance with their understanding of the standard and were executing in accordance with their project plan.

Several mentioned that they were concerned that other projects with which they interacted did not seem to be following the standard as closely as they were. Sometimes when they had finished the work in one phase of the cycle and were passing it on to the folks working on the

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next phase there were disagreements on the completeness or the contents of the deliverable. There were different perceptions of what should be done in each of the phases and what should be included in the products of the phase.

A third observation was that their upper management (in this case a Colonel) never really got involved in developing or enforcing the standard process. The standard process was developed by the staff and issued over the signature of the senior manager at the time. However, the staff did not develop any reporting process to allow senior managers to check to see that projects were complying with the standard. The Colonel never saw the standard. It was signed and issued by his predecessor and he had no regular reporting that would even indicate that it existed. For him, the standard was totally invisible.

The class members described an essentially invisible standard. Sure, each step in the process was described in a book that everyone had on a shelf of standards documents. The standard steps were also described in a set of slides used in the training. But those slides were on the trainer's shelf.

The standard process was also in the minds of each of the project team members and managers as a mixture of their perceptions of the concepts and the details of what it was supposed to be. It was in each person's head but no one else could see it there. So, the standard process was invisible to all, not just the Colonel.

Agreeing on the Standard

I asked the class to speculate on how it might help if it were possible to get everyone to agree on the exact description of the standard life cycle and to operate in accordance with it. The class members suggested several benefits that might accrue. They suggested that having a clear, well-understood path from start to finish should remove the current uncertainties about exactly what each team should be doing and when. If that happened, the team would become more confident that they were doing what they should be doing, not missing anything and not stepping on the toes of any of the other, related teams. Team members would know exactly what to do and could check off against the standard to know when they were done.

They thought it would eliminate the disagreements when going from one phase to the next. It would ensure that the work of each phase was complete and appropriate and ready to be used as the input to the next phase. One of the class members also observed that having a clear boundary would also prevent the team working on one phase from overshooting the boundary and attempting to do work that should be done in the next phase.

The last thing they mentioned was that if they were in full agreement and all saw the life cycle exactly the same it would be easy to check for compliance. There would be no opportunity for anyone to use the excuse, "I thought that was your responsibility".

We agreed on the potential benefits but the class was skeptical. Short of having a mass meeting of all concerned, they thought that they could never get the kind of common understanding that would be required. One member mentioned the fact that there was regular, frequent turnover in the organization and within a few months you would have to have the same mass meeting again because 25 to 30 percent of the staff would have changed by then. In short, they didn't think it would be possible in their organization.

Going Public

I told them a true story about how another organization just like theirs had done it in a way that was ridiculously simple. Furthermore, it had worked and was continuing to work despite turnover in staff and management. It was done by creating and posting a big chart of the life cycle in a place where everyone would see it on a regular basis. They called the process "Going Public".

The organization was a 60-person contractor organization in Oak Ridge that was responding to government requests for changes to a large database. Over 50 such requests had to be handled each month. There was a company standard for handling change requests that included a detailed, step by step description of how it should be done. The manual was developed and issued by the corporate headquarters in Tysons Corner. All of the staff had been trained in the official life cycle.

However, the company books were on the shelves and the training was either forgotten or ignored. Each change request was handled individually in the way that the team leader felt would be best. Responsibilities for the individual steps in the process "happened" on an ad hoc basis. As you might expect, chaos reigned. There were always crises and misunderstandings of who should be doing what and so on.

When we asked them about their process they said that it was written in the book but they didn't follow it. We asked them to draw a picture of what they really did. They said they couldn't because everyone did his work differently. Just as we did in our class exercise, we asked them to each draw a high-level picture of their process for handling the requests. The results were the same as the results of the class exercise. When we compared them we found different steps, different nomenclature and different understandings of the tasks involved in each of the blocks. However, there was enough similarity that it appeared that the various approaches could be harmonized into a process that might work for everyone. They agreed to try to do that.

The way they approached it was interesting and effective. The leaders of the three teams worked together on a whiteboard to get agreement on the basic steps involved in the life cycle of a change. They got a 15-foot long sheet of paper, laid out the basic process and posted the

foundation diagram on the wall in a hallway that everyone passed through at least twice a day. They worked with each of the teams to fill in the details of each of the basic blocks. They put a box of Post-it® notes and some pens nearby and asked everyone to post comments and suggestions to improve how the chart illustrated exactly what they were doing.

Once a week the team leaders revisited and updated the chart to reflect the comments on the process trying to reconcile differences. Within a few weeks the comments converged and an agreed process began to emerge. When we returned and asked to see their process, they pointed to their chart proudly and said, "This is it and we all are following it."

As evidence of that, they showed us their development folders. Each one had a list of the life cycle process steps printed on it and a place for initials to be applied as each step was completed and signed off by both the sender and the receiver. All of the relevant documentation was recorded in each folder.

We then asked how it compared to the corporate standard. That sparked another review of their process relative to the corporate standard and major differences were discovered. At this point the team ownership of "their" life cycle was so strong that they agreed to recommend their process as a replacement for the corporate standard – and it was ultimately accepted.

Conclusion

The result of the process is that team members experienced the beneficial effects of having their own, visible life cycle almost immediately. There were fewer misunderstandings, fewer crises, team members could take vacations and someone could fill in for them because the work to be done at each stage was specified and would be done by a substitute just the same way that the original assignee would have done it. As turnover occurred, new team members were introduced to the chart and shown where they fit in the various processes. The chart was kept on the wall as a constant reference.

Some smiles began to appear on the faces of the team members. They told us, "It's really great to come to work and know exactly what I have to do today and when I've done it to be able to go home. No more crises and no more unscheduled overtime!"

My class members were impressed. They recognized that "Going Public" certainly had some possibility of helping them. We discussed whether the situation now was sufficiently painful for them that it would be worth the effort to replicate the work of the Oak Ridge team. Feelings were mixed, but some seemed to think it would be worth a try. It proves the point that **where there's a wall, there's a way!**

About the Author

Since retirement, Bill Flury has been developing and teaching process improvement to help the next generation of project managers and systems engineers succeed by applying he lessons he has learned. Bill is a successful project manager, process improvement consultant and systems engineer with a lifetime record of 85 projects all on-time, within budget and with fully satisfied clients. He successfully developed major government information systems and taught project management and process improvement to government clients.

Bill has published five books with practical advice for all managers. All books are published by Amazon CreateSpace and can be found at: https://www.amazon.com/author/billflury

Project Success Stories: Real World Adventures in Project Management shares real stories of successful projects, and the unique paths they took to that success.

Don't Blame Fred: Build Blame Free Processes is full of stories about projects that have become consistently successful by focusing on their project management and work processes.

Draw What You Do: A Practical Approach to Process Improvement describes how to improve the way you work by drawing and using visuals to find better ways to work.

WYSIWYG Tales: See What You Do presents real-life stories from Bill's experience in helping clients see and improve their work processes.

A Tinkerer's Notebook: Sharing the Joy of Tinkering outlines the principles and practices that he and other tinkerers follow to ensure success.

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