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Surviving the Multi-project Gridlock PM Tactics for "Road-rage" Organizations

Managing projects used to be like taking a drive along a pleasant country road. Most people worked on just one project at a time and there were so few projects that team members were eager to come along for the ride. Now, with growth and the need to quickly improve performance while cutting costs, the roadways are jammed with projects. Seemingly anyone can launch yet another project without checking on the availability of project team members or even evaluating whether the planned route makes sense for the organization. While there's a lot more traffic, the company hasn't installed traffic lights or street signs and there is no highway patrol. The organization is headed for multi-project gridlock and your PM techniques need a tune-up or your projects will join the seemingly endless line of smoking project wrecks littering the organizational landscape.

The signs of approaching multi-project gridlock are all too evident.

Can anyone finish on time...or deliver business value?

As we near the gridlock stage, there are so many screaming escalation sirens that no one pays attention; almost every project is late and over budget. Because almost every problem is escalated to the executive level for resolution, they spend little time managing the project portfolio or setting strategy. Why? Because project managers and even program managers have little authority to solve problems. As a result, it's very lonely at the top. Executives know the project portfolio is out of control but lack the strategic tools to bring it under control or even decide which projects to approve or what priority to give them.

Every project is priority #1... for a day

New projects flood the on-ramps, some with sufficient fuel to travel just far enough to collide with other projects. While each is accompanied by much shouting and acclaim, the roadsides are filled with abandoned projects that consumed a lot of resources before they stalled out.

You don't need a driver's license or a map...just do it!

Some projects vehicles have no written plan at all and the PMs use micro-management techniques and their personal brilliance to keep the slugs on the project team working like galley slaves. Of course these PMs spend all their time looking out the back window trying to figure out what happened last week and are a hazard to everyone else. Other projects have monstrous project plans, with PMs who believe they can specify everyone's hourly "to do" list months in advance. The plans are so big that they're never updated after the work starts and thus these huge documents block the entire windshield.



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The end result, in either case is project managers who commit to any due date a sponsor mentions but they're driving blind, not really knowing destination, when they'll get there or for how long they'll need their resources. Many of these vehicles also have no budget and so the project work and any changes to it are seen as "free" to the sponsor or users. Without this gas gauge, it's impossible to control scope and these vehicles careen down the thruway, changing course every time the political winds shift.

Team members: hitchhikers looking for a way out of town

The people working on projects are a surly lot because no one is managing their overall workloads and no priorities are set. Instead, they face 80-hour workweeks and a parade of PMs striding up to their cubicles, each explaining how their particular project should receive the highest attention because an 800 lb. executive gorilla is "watching this project very closely."

Traffic control is a junkyard that collects project wrecks

We'll talk about how organizations can avoid this gridlock with traffic control from enterprise project management and portfolio management processes. But until that happens, you and your projects need to survive the road rage. We make the best of a bad situation with techniques that allow executives to exercise strategic control over our project, make the business value clear and try to carve out a little authority over our project team.

Survival technique #1- Give decision-makers the data to decide

Think about what the project executive's world is like. One PM after another submits unintelligible techno-babble project plans filled with mushy, unverifiable statements about future benefits. These PMs may think they're impressing the executive with their technical mastery but what they usually impress upon the executive is fear that this project's driver has no understanding or interest in delivering business value. Then the PM fights like a mother bear protecting her cubs to defend the planned duration and budget, if they even have one. As nothing is measurable or verifiable, the executive can't track progress without diving head first into the minutia or attending mind-numbing status meetings.

Think of the contrast when you walk in with a 1-2 page project summary that is written in the user's or sponsor's language. You have hard-edged and measurable business outcomes that are described in operation terms not vague technical deliverables. That's so different than what the executive is accustomed to seeing that you may be greeted with stunned silence. Rather than fighting for your project plan, you offer alternatives before the executive asks for them. You're presenting already developed alternatives for finishing faster, doing it more cheaply and delivering more or less business value. You're actually providing the executive with data to make decisions and exercise strategic control. And because your plan is built on measured outcomes, the executive can track progress against



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unambiguous and objectively measurable business outcomes throughout your project's life cycle. Let's use the credibility we gain with this first technique, to fuel the things we're going to ask for in the second.

Survival technique #2 - Push the envelope on your charter

Gridlocked organizations usually do little or nothing to prioritize projects or specifically allocate resources to projects, which is the principal cause of project failure. So, we'll use our project charter to try and remedy this failing. We'll ask the executive to give us, or help us secure, authority to assign work directly to at least some of our project team members and we'll also ask for "ownership" of a specific hunk of their time (i.e., 4 hours a day from Pat Smith for the month of September).

The idea of a PM "owning time" and assigning work to a project team member who is not their organizational subordinate may be heresy. We'll make it even worse by asking for some reward authority (i.e. input into a "borrowed" person's performance review). But the organization's lack of enterprise processes is a serious risk to the project and "pushing the envelope" like this before we start work is our best chance for not joining the wreckage along the roadways. We ask for these authorities, picking our shots in terms of the "borrowed" people who have significant project accountabilities or who come from lending departments who are notorious for breaking those solemn pre-project promises of "full support."

We may not get all we ask for, or any authority at all for that matter. But we have offered the executive a very inexpensive way to reduce risk and improve the odds of project success. Also, it's far better to discuss these issues now, when our credibility is relatively high than after we're running late and our resource management problems just sound like whining and finger pointing.

Survival technique #3 – A team with accountabilities, not "to do's"

In the chaos of the multi-project gridlock, it often seems as if the only way to control the team is with micro-management; detailed "to do" lists and a lot of cubicle-hopping to check on whether project work is getting done. Many also add project status meetings that are go-around-the-table interrogations of each team member. All these processes ensure just one thing: the micro-managing PM is the only person with accountability for, or any concern about, the project result.

Remember the work environment of your team members. They're all on several projects and probably being micro-managed on each. On top of that, their other projects probably suffer from lack of clarity on the scope and business purpose and much of their work is wasted, as the project is routinely "re-defined." You have a clear business outcome and maybe a little bit of authority from techniques #1 and #2. When your plan holds them accountable for end results instead of hourly tasks, and you trust them just a little bit by not micro-managing, you may get a bit more commitment to the project's results and their assignment than they give to other projects.

PMTalk NewsLetter

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Organizational traffic control

None of these survival techniques are a cure-all for the weaknesses in an organization that's suffering from multi-project gridlock. All they do is improve your odds of success in a bad situation. Organizations eventually address gridlock. The first faltering steps usually include buying expensive software that does nothing to cure the process problems and allowing a committee of PMs to add a layer of paperwork to the already hazardous roadway.

The solution usually comes after the pain of repeated project failures causes the organization to implement a consistent project management protocol across all projects, explicitly setting priorities and allocating resources and cross-functional authority to the PMs. Of course, the prudent organization takes these steps early to avoid multi-project gridlock.

Summary

For more information on these survival techniques, visit our website www.4pm.com and review the Project Management KnowledgeBase and our in-person and distance learning programs. For enterprise project management solutions, look at our Achievement-driven Project Management methodology and our Enterprise PM sections.

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