

Conquering Complexity: Leading the Way with Simplicity, Clarity, and Focus

By Jerry Manas, PMP

When managing projects---especially those in extreme environments, where speed and agility are the name of the game, complexity can be a real killer. There are three areas where organizations struggle most:

- Overly complex or burdensome processes
- Verbose and/or unclear communication to team members and stakeholders
- Lack of focus, leading to distraction and diluted efforts

This is true for organizations at the highest level, and, not surprisingly, it's also the case with project management. No doubt, simpler processes, clearer communication, and greater focus can lead to breakthrough success in organizations and in projects. Let's look at these three areas in more detail.

Simpler Processes

I often see two types of organizations---those with hardly any processes and those with overly burdensome processes. For the latter, what typically occurs is a phenomenon I call *process creep*. Let's take an IT software project as an example. First, there's the overzealous PMO that tries to implement PMI standards verbatim, launching a full suite of end-to-end processes and trying to reach "full maturity" overnight. Then there are usually separate departments involving quality, security, application deployment, architecture, and a whole host of other parties that each have some stake in the implementation process.

Adding to the mix is that each group looks their own area in isolation and in many ways, must justify their existence with a wealth of process steps. The general thinking is that the more process steps there are, the more diligent the people in these groups must be. In this world, rigor rules the roost.

There are several problems with this approach, however.

- Each group is too self-absorbed to be thinking about the customer, the goals, and the benefits of the project
- Since each group is developing their processes individually, redundancies occur and the whole process slows down.
- Tools are typically not implemented in an integrated fashion, so sometimes multiple tools exist, and/or the tools do not effectively support a streamlined process
- There is not a good governance process in place to quickly determine when process steps aren't needed and/or can be overridden

- Reward systems are set up to encourage output and rigor, often at the expense of customer benefits and speed of delivery

Surely, processes are a good thing, but redundant and overly complex processes that get in the way of value are not. Instead we need to bring disparate groups together (including stakeholders and customers), and agree on a simpler, more targeted process flow. Reward systems should support the group effort towards a more efficient process. Where appropriate, simple checklists should be used in place of approval steps. Software systems should be reviewed from the perspective of the people who use them, to find ways to make the tools an enabler and not a barrier. And finally, people should be engaged in determining what needs to be standardized and how best to do it. Not everything needs standardization.

All of these things can serve to simplify work processes and reduce complexity.

Clearer Communication

Quick, what's the single most important goal your organization is currently trying to achieve? What are its three top challenges? How about for your team? What is the single most important benefit your team is supposed to deliver, and how does it relate to the organization's goals? What are the team's top three issues?

Unfortunately, this information gets lost in the shuffle in most organizations. What exists instead is one of two extremes---no communication at all or overly complex communication. In either case, people are confused about goals and benefits. Guiding principles rarely exist, and in their place are empty value statements laden with clichés.

On top of that, people are asked to view bullet-ridden PowerPoint presentations that bombard them with too much information. And in meetings, technical experts speak in jargon and acronyms that business people struggle to translate into something meaningful. Likewise, business people struggle to make their problems clear. Project Plans fare no better in that they often contain so much detail that nobody can get a true sense of where the project really stands.

As Strother Martin said in *Cool Hand Luke*, "What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

What if instead we concentrated on:

- The overarching theme or mission the organization is trying to achieve.
- Operating principles and guidelines that encourage correct action more so than empty buzz words (better yet, stories can move mountains).
- The goals and benefits of each project (in customer terms), to be sure teams don't lose sight of the ball when making process decisions.
- Upcoming milestones and the top 3 or 4 issues for each project to get a quick, concise view of project status.
- Clear, simple communications that have one primary message supported by 2-4 supporting points.
- Removing bullets from PowerPoint where possible, leaning more towards diagrams, pictures, and stories to illustrate key points. Bullets are fine in articles and supporting documents---not as a presentation vehicle.

- Assigning liaisons to bridge language gaps across business and technical areas, and/or conducting lunch-and-learn classes on business issues.
- Moving to more frequent informal communication and less meetings, unless the meeting is to make a decision or conduct work.

These are just a few tools we can use to clarify communication in our organizations. As we've seen thus far, simplifying our processes and reducing the noise in our communication can greatly improve productivity and make our organization less complex. But there is one more element needed to conquer complexity---focus.

Greater Focus

Vince Lombardi said, "Success demands singleness of purpose." This is true both of organizations and individuals. And indeed, organizational focus helps bring about individual focus. What I often see instead in organizations is distraction.

There are simply too many initiatives that rely on the same resources, diluting efforts everywhere. When there *is* focus, it's usually directed internally and not toward the customer or on business benefits. The same is true with metrics. Either there are none or there are so many that people can't concentrate on improving any of them. Again, efforts become diluted.

Successful organizations typically narrow their list of projects to those that match their overall goals and aspirations. They also focus their efforts on a targeted customer audience, and that audience's needs. Paradoxically, some organizations even decentralize in an effort to gain focus. For instance, they may have overall guiding principles, and combine that with decentralized areas, each one focusing on their own line of business and customer base. The trouble happens when resources and/or customers are shared, in which case a singular focus and sense of purpose is critical.

When there are too many projects combined with ongoing maintenance and support activities---all competing for the same resources---people cannot give each project the attention it deserves. They cannot spend time understanding customer needs and building relations to ensure success. But instead of finding ways to sharpen the focus, most organizations spend time making their organization even more complex in attempts to "control the chaos." They add process rigor, and approval steps, which only tend to slow everything down. In essence, they lose business agility.

Instead we need to ask, "Where do we have common goals and customers, and how can we better structure ourselves so that our resources can focus on that?" This may mean dedicating certain resources to certain areas, perhaps even by program instead of split into departmental silos. On the surface this may seem inefficient, but it's not nearly as inefficient as the constant disruptions and barriers to creating customer value.

We must also ask, "How can we create singleness of purpose in our organization, and with each team that needs to work together toward a common goal or customer base?" What overarching goal should we embrace? What emotional stories can we tell to get people engaged in achieving this goal? What rewards can we offer?

Finally, we must ask, "How can we focus our efforts toward the highest value-producing work, without impeding the work we need to do to keep operations running

effectively? This is not unlike the Economy of Force model employed by Napoleon Bonaparte and used to this very day in military strategy---focus the *maximum effective amount of resources* on a select few primary objectives and focus the *minimum effective amount of resources* on a select few secondary objectives.

With all of these answers in place, a good portfolio management and governance system can be an enabler for greater focus. However, if such systems are put in place without the right focus or organizational structure, they instead add to the bureaucracy and create more complexity.

From these questions, it's clear that improved focus can be achieved through a combination of self-reflection, communication, and optimal organizational structure. Focus is an area that takes all levels of management to engage and commit to, but the payoff is tremendous.

Summary

Organizations, teams, and individuals cannot prosper if they are distracted by complexity. By having simpler processes, clearer communication, and greater focus, we reduce errors, increase morale, and boost productivity. In such a world, people understand what they are supposed to do and why. They feel more compelled to make a difference. They perform to their highest potential.

We know from scientific and human studies, that in nature and in organizations, complex systems have simple roots. Thus we cannot conquer complexity with more complexity. We need to conquer it with simplicity, clarity, and focus. When it comes to control, less is more. And the tools we've discussed enable us to reduce control, yet gain value. And what can be wrong with that? As Leonardo da Vinci said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

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