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Deepwater: A lesson in transforming large projects

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The larger the project, the greater the challenges encountered.

When those challenges materialize, large projects typically experience greater difficulty in adopting corrective changes. Consider what it takes to change the course of an aircraft carrier—a fair amount of time and ocean are expended to turn the ship. Adjusting the course of a major project is not much different and provides valuable lessons to the sponsors and managers of project of any size in the federal government.

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) is several years into an overhaul of its fleet and key operational assets. The Deepwater program is a \$25 billion effort to repair, build, and procure the entire USCG inventory over a period of 25 years or more. As with many programs of this size, planning and implementation breakdowns have occurred, primarily related to failures in procurement and management practices and ineffective contract provisions. A 2007 report from the Government Accountability Office ([GAO-07-446T](#)) observed that “The Coast Guard had not effectively implemented key components needed to manage the program and oversee the system integrator.”

What is the Coast Guard doing that can inform program and project managers and sponsors across the federal enterprise? In July 2009, the agency rolled out the *Blueprint for Continuous Improvement – Version 4*, documenting the agency’s ongoing effort to reform business processes, particularly among the Acquisition Directorate that oversees Deepwater and other major initiatives. Key elements of those business process reforms included: “codifying roles and responsibilities of those involved in acquisition; informing decision-makers; adopting and implementing transparent, consistent and effective policies and processes; hiring, training and retaining an effective workforce; and collecting and sharing knowledge.” Interestingly, these same elements are often seen as critical to successfully executing public sector projects.

The Blueprint documents an Action Plan that highlight themes regularly encountered on federal projects. Here are a few examples of the tasks and initiatives undertaken to right the course of the Deepwater program; these improvements are applicable to most federal project management environments.

Organizational Alignment and Leadership

- Develop a Quarterly Review Process for project performance.
- Increase awareness and visibility of Program/Project Manager authority and responsibility.
- Create PM forum for knowledge sharing of best practices and lessons learned.

Policies and Processes

- Institute processes to demonstrate value of the Program Manager/Project Manager.
- Mandate requirement for separate individual project Risk Management Plan.
- Require Program Managers to conduct and document key reviews that include stakeholder perspectives.

Human Capital

- Provide evidence that certified program managers meet education, training, and experience requirements.
- Develop recommendations for Program/Project Manager screening and selection process.

Information Management and Stewardship

- Implement Earned Value Management on all required acquisition projects in accordance with DHS requirements.
- Develop an Integrated Master Plan and Integrated Master Schedule for all projects and track status.

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Overhauling a program with a wide array of projects, processes, and stakeholders is no small feat. Some improvement efforts require multiple iterations until the desired result is achieved. In a follow-up report on Deepwater in 2010 (GAO-10-411T), the GAO acknowledged continuing challenges related to Deepwater, but recognized significant improvements in the overall management of the program.

The Coast Guard's Blueprint for Continuous Improvement highlights common challenges to projects of any size in organizations across the federal government. The Action Plan documents the steps to address the challenges and improve the project management environment in the organization. The lessons the Coast Guard has learned from the Deepwater program, and the process and path the agency has outlined to implement improvements, provide a framework for other federal agencies to successfully address challenges in their project management environments.

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