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Driving through Project Roadblocks

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While all projects are fraught with obstacles, government projects have several unique roadblocks that many project team members have surely encountered. Here are a few of the more frequent roadblocks and tips on how some agencies have sought to mitigate or remove them.

Project sponsorship is an oft-identified issue. We start here because the project sponsor's role includes helping to remove roadblocks. Practitioners and executives often encounter two major, sponsor-related roadblocks: clarity of the sponsor's role and information quality.

In conversations with project, program, and PMO leaders in several agencies, executive sponsorship and leadership emerged as the key to implementing or institutionalizing project management within an organization. Sponsors unfamiliar with the discipline or unclear about their roles and responsibilities cannot be effectively engaged or contribute to project success. To combat this roadblock, several government agencies have implemented orientation programs to promote project management as a discipline, meeting one-on-one with sponsors or in peer groups to highlight the importance of project management and determine how their specific role directly contributes to project success.

A lack of information, or poor quality of information, limits sponsors' ability to be effective. Project managers are responsible for providing the right information at the right time, using the right tools. Some agencies, like the General Services Administration's (GSA) Public Buildings Service, avoid this roadblock by employing web-based "portals" for PMs, teams members, and sponsors to access information and status on projects.

Project sponsors can improve role clarity and information quality by establishing communication expectations at the outset of the project—determining what they want and need to know and how frequently, as well as what feedback or guidance the PM needs to effectively manage the project. A formal Communication Plan will facilitate this process and provide the PM and team with a map for navigating this issue. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) builds an Engagement Acceptance Meeting into their project management methodology, a step that clarifies the level of senior management involvement and communication in each assessment they perform. High- and low-tech tools can increase the effectiveness and quality of information that is shared with sponsors, enabling them to better perform their critical project role.

Project managers' skills and capabilities are another frequently-cited roadblock. A 2008 study by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Council on Excellence in Government revealed that a "large majority of survey respondents do not currently hold certification from a professional organization," such as the Project Management Institute (PMI) or the Defense Acquisition University (DAU). While certification is not the best indicator of a PM's skills or capabilities, it does demonstrate completion of formal training and a certain level of practical experience. Instead, many practitioners find themselves as "accidental PMs"—anointed out of necessity instead of relevant skills, aptitude, interest, or past performance.

This situation is complicated by the **lack of a formal career path for federal PMs**. No specific or standard "Project Manager" title series exists across the federal government, leaving agencies to "force fit" PMs into positions that are unrelated to their responsibilities and not likely to promote their professional development. In a recent conversation, project managers from the Treasury Department expressed concern that people given the PM title without the relevant skills or experience have an unintended negative consequence beyond risking a single project's success. Their lack of familiarity with formal practice of project management causes confusion among team members and stakeholders and contributes to a "devaluation" of the discipline in the organization.

The Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management and NASA's Academy of Program/Project & Engineering Leadership are recognized pioneers in establishing formal internal training and certification programs within the federal government. These early programs are compliant with OMB's Federal Acquisition Certification for Program/Project Management. FAC-P/PM may be an early indicator for a more formal process of certifying and professionalizing PMs in the federal

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government. Stay tuned to this newsletter for continuing coverage of the implementation of this program across the federal government.

Where formal training programs don't exist, project managers must pursue self-study and seek opportunities for professional growth. One successful method employed in a variety of agencies, formally and informally, is mentoring. With limited training budgets organizations are looking within and finding that many experienced PMs are enthusiastic about sharing their expertise with others interested in the profession. For adult learners, mentoring is one of the most effective ways to improve skills and capabilities.

Project managers have company when it comes to addressing the issues described here. One key piece of advice heard from the cadre of project management practitioners is to address roadblocks head-on. Create coalitions of project management proponents, enlist executives to clear the way, and present options to improve sponsorship and PM skills and capabilities.

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