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Bringing Flexibility to Bureaucracy

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Many government organizations around the globe are moving toward formal project management practices. Formal methods offer not only a consistent approach to managing project work, but also enable governments to establish more efficient and flexible working environments.

Highly bureaucratic public sector organizations often struggle with implementing changes to their environments. Factors that drive agility and flexibility out of organizations include:

- **Highly regulated environments.** Complex legal and regulatory constraints drive organizations to adopt a “common minimum” approach. Only the most modest of changes are ever implemented.
- **Ingrained processes and tools.** Governments lack the impetus to continuously innovate which drives many private sector companies.
- **Change-averse cultures.** Given laws that are hard to change and insular processes, the people in many government organizations tend to be change-resistant.



The result of these forces is a struggle to find flexible approaches to completing new work. That said, there are many instances of government organizations that do not operate according to the generalizations above. **To be successful, governments must adopt project management as a way to bring flexibility to the organization.**

Large bureaucracies often benefit from leveraging the entrepreneurial aspects of project management. Project management can act like a “small business-within-a-business” by enabling the suspension or minimization of many working assumptions inherent in typical bureaucratic processes.

Clearly-defined project boundaries enable teams to operate according to different—often more flexible—set of rules. For example, application development teams can adopt modified rules for migrating data and code between the development and test tiers, thereby enabling them to quickly iterate the development of functionality. In this approach, a project operates as a small business within the larger organization, allowing the team to move faster.

To be flexible, project teams must imbue the project environment with these key principles:

Priorities over procedures

Projects must adapt to changing priorities on daily basis. Adopting a “priorities over procedures” approach allows the team to understand what is really important and address those elements as appropriate. Procedures cannot be ignored, but they must be adaptive to the needs of the project.

Outcomes over outputs

Projects drive change, and often the early understanding of

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specific work products quickly becomes inadequate. This circumstance creates tension as a project team must reconcile the real requirements from their stated work product.

To follow this tenet, the team must continuously reorient itself to the desired outcomes and develop roadmaps that link the work product and other outputs to the larger outcomes.

Process over personalities

Flexibility is often supported by adhering to a process that engenders evaluation and reflection. Processes help organizations stretch and balance the anchors associated with large personalities.

These principles should not imply ignoring procedures, outputs and personalities. These are important aspects to ensuring that work gets done, but there also needs to be recognition that project management offers the highly bureaucratic organization the benefits of flexibility.

Three factors that help lead to flexibility are project teams that have:

1. The right people with a mix of skills and knowledge who are willing to embrace change and new ways of doing business;
2. The right focus, oriented around results and process. Team members' roles should reflect the focus on getting real results; and
3. The right tools and processes to ensuring a successful approach.

Project management offers many benefits to a bureaucratic organization. The flexibility of a project provides a balance to the procedure-laden environments. By envisioning projects as small businesses, the organization can safely test new ways of operating without the cost of implementing widespread change.

Project management increasingly is a critical skill set in the public sector. An article that appeared in the [4 December 2009](#) issue of *Community Post* discussed how project management is a lever of change in public organizations. Today, you can see that project management also provides a vehicle for improved flexibility.



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