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## Project Management: A Lever of Change in the Public Sector

By Tim Jaques, PMP

Today, project management is a discipline under strain in the public sector. Economic conditions globally have led to massive cuts in all types of government-sponsored projects – from large construction to information technology to human services. In response, many governments are funding projects to stimulate growth in the economy.

The disparity created by poor economic conditions and increased government funding is putting pressure on project management to deliver value quickly within the public sector.

Public sector project management is fraught with unique challenges, including:

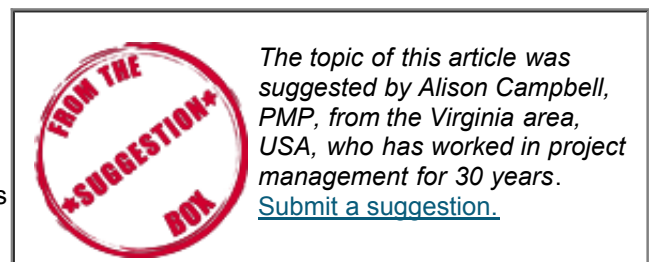
- › **Bureaucratic environment.** Many government agencies operate under extensive legal, regulatory, and policy constraints. These rules tend to create a culture that is resistant to change. Bureaucratic environments will often decrease the speed of change.
- › **Incremental thinking is the norm.** Because many government entities operate in a steady state for years at a time, there is little incentive to consider any change but the most incremental of improvements. Incremental thinking decreases the depth of change.
- › **Projects increasingly operate across boundaries.** Projects that depend upon cross-agency collaboration are on the rise, and often require advanced communication skills. This type of environment increases both the speed and depth of change required.

Project management offers a way to address these challenges by acting as a lever of change. Projects can cut through the morass of politics and shortsightedness by delivering on clear objectives and bringing change through multiple channels:

- › **A proving ground for new strategies.** When governments innovate or take a new path in solving a problem, project management enables an efficient, concise environment for change.
- › **Beyond the incremental.** Highly bureaucratic institutions usually change slowly and incrementally. Projects offer a way to make quantum leaps in understanding and approaches to problem solving.
- › **Better stakeholder management.** Cross-boundary projects require innovative ways to address stakeholder needs. A project environment enables systematic stakeholder management.

These powerful tools are commonplace in project management, yet they can be lost in the throng of normal, bureaucratic activity. To be effective, these levers of change need to be deployed aggressively and managed proactively.

To do so, project managers need to sell the value of project management within their organizations. So what can a public sector project manager do to increase the perceived value of their project? Here are three activities that will help



yield value for projects.

Activity	Description
Ensure a sense of urgency exists	Sufficient urgency is needed to overcome the bureaucratic inertia that exists across many government entities. Develop urgency through deadlines and problem statements with calls to action.
Create value statements	On your project, create value statements that describe the value of this project from various stakeholders' perspective.
Measure the value	Measure project value using earned value, triple constraints, and qualitative measures such as customer satisfaction and degree of mission fulfillment.

Project management provides an effective framework for change that can have a transformative effect across the public sector. But it takes strong leadership and an environment conducive to project success to really move forward. As the world emerges from the economic perils of 2009, we must all work to ensure that project management is delivering value through effective change management.



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