Healing Sick Projects and Programs: Information Executives Want

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Anticipating what senior executives will want to know about the wellness of ongoing initiatives (programs, projects or other work types) involves measuring what matters to them from their perspective relative to your organization, the space in which you work and your organization's culture.

Key Findings

- Executives do not require "alerts" when projects are running smoothly, but rather when what ought to be happening is not happening, or when things are happening that shouldn't.

- Information on programs and projects can be grouped conveniently into five groups — variance, movement, events and results, risk trends, and intangibles.

Recommendations

- Extract information or knowledge from available initiatives' data; then map the knowledge against the context of what matters to the executives in charge and other stakeholders, refining and shaping this through face-to-face discussion.

- For more-effective and actionable initiative wellness information, work with program or project sponsors and stakeholders to clearly define a consensus for action, and identify a change driver. If both are not readily apparent, defer the work for later.

Overview

Program and project management (PPM) leaders need to consider what senior executives will want to know about the wellness of ongoing initiatives (programs, projects and other work types). As a starting point, PPM leaders must consider "the measurement of what matters" — that is, what matters to your executives, your organization, the business or government space in which you work, and your culture. There's one basic rule of thumb to keep in mind at all times:

- **Do not mistake data for information.** Information denotes knowledge, and knowledge is much more than a collection of facts, opinions and numbers collected together into a clump of data.

Analysis

Look at the data you have or can readily provide to your executives, and brainstorm this data to extract bits of knowledge. Then, map this knowledge against the context of what matters to the executives. Begin evolving your bits of knowledge into an ordered list, ranging from "interesting but not critical" to "critical/urgent/immediately actionable." Repeatedly ask these questions:

- Why does this matter?

- Who needs this information?

- What action can/will executives take, if they have this information?

How to Get an Idea of What Executives "Really" Want

Executives look internally at the organization, externally at the marketplace and globally at the total environment. Thus, they have multiple viewpoints, and these viewpoints quite likely are:

- Very different from that of the group that collects and analyzes data for them

- Unique to (or shaped by) their roles and responsibilities

Take the output from the brainstorming exercise, and shape an initial set of executive information about project wellness. Keep this small, simple and unambiguous. Armed with your first iteration, set up a schedule of interviews and round-table discussions with a group of interested executives:

- Look for executives who have expressed their needs or interests in the past for "better" or "more-timely" information about project wellness.

- Use your initial set of executive information as a "stalking horse" for these executive reviews.

- Ask for feedback. Check what is good and — equally important — what is not. Be sure to ask them what action they will take with this information. Refine, revise and retest what you are hearing from your executive feedback.

Convert Executive Feedback Into Action

Determine, first, the level of interest and support for improvements in project wellness information. Remember: Moral support is helpful but not actionable; because you will need funding and resources to make needed changes. Look for a champion for better or more effective

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initiative wellness information from among the executives who participated in the feedback sessions. Work with sponsors to:

- Create a consensus for action

- Identify a change driver that impels (or propels) the needed action

Both of these are vital to moving forward. If one or both of these cannot be identified, it may be better to defer this work to some future date.

Where you have identified a need for change and a consensus for action, the next step is to develop a business case. Locate in your organization the process and the template for business cases.

Work through the process under the leadership of your sponsor, and move forward to obtain review and approval of the business case, and the actions and changes it describes.

Grouping and Understanding Executive Information

For the most part, executives do not require "alerts" or "attention items" and do not intervene in projects or programs where everything is proceeding as expected. Rather, executives are interested and poised to take action in areas where what ought to be happening is not happening, or conversely, where things are happening that ought not to be.

Begin by identifying executive information in five groups — variance, movement, events and results, risk trends, and intangibles.

Understanding Executive Information — Examples by Group

Variance

Characteristics of variances include:

- Things that differ from expectations, when compared to some baseline

- A state, event or action that is "out of bounds" for some acceptable range

- A continuing drift that shapes a trend of performance always outside an acceptable range

- A condition in which actual spending differs from planned spending

These variances are all measured against an established or agreed-on "baseline" contained in a program/project plan or schedule, or business case.

Variance information is most often of interest to business stakeholders for initiatives, and the IT leaders who are the "owners" of specific initiatives. Variances that are specific to spending and budgets will interest the organization's financial function and the CFO.

Scenario: Budget and Spending — Planned Versus Actual-to-Date Spending

A variation is expressed as a percentage outside an acceptable "range" of variation — low to high.

Example: At this point in the execution of a program, the planned total spending is $3.75 million. The actual spending is $5.7 million. The agreed/acceptable range of variation is plus or minus 4%, and this variation is greater than 5%.

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Scenario: Budget and Spending — Estimate to Complete

- A variation expressed as a percentage

- Outside an acceptable "range" of variation — low to high

Example: At this point in the execution, the planned estimate to complete the work effort is $10 million. The most recent calculation for this metric is $11.5 million. The agreed/acceptable range of variation is plus or minus 6%, and this variation is 15%.

Scenario: Resources Consumption — Planned Versus Actual by Period

- By role or by numbers — The variation expressed in terms of planned versus actual of total resources or resources within role

- Within a stated period, such as a month or a quarter

- Outside an acceptable "range" of variation

Example: At this point in the execution, overall staffing for the program or project during the month of May was planned to be 75 resources. Actual staffing varied between 71 and 84, averaging 81. The agreed/acceptable range of variation is plus or minus five resources.

Movement

Characteristics of movement include:

- These are things that are "uprooted" from where they have been for some period of time and moved to some other position or location.

- These typically relate to things located within or along the life cycle or the project or program schedule.

These movements are all measured against an established/agreed "baseline" contained in, most typically, a program, project plan or schedule.

Movement information will interest those who are "downstream" from the point in the initiative at which the movement occurs. This can be the project managers of related or dependent initiatives, potential consumers or users of results, and components or outcomes from initiatives. Movement may also be of interest to those whose organizational function includes compliance or regulatory affairs.

Scenario: Dates Linked to Major Milestones or Deliverables — Original or Baseline Versus Current Version or Revision

- The variation is expressed in number of days.

- A change occurs that is outside an acceptable range of variation.

Example: At this point in the execution, the use cases/user scenarios deliverable was scheduled on the baseline work plan for completion and acceptance by 15 April. The projected completion for this major work product has been revised to 10 May, a variation (late) of 18 workdays. The agreed/acceptable range of variation is plus or minus 10 workdays (two workweeks).

Scenario: Resource Consumption or Life Cycle Location — by Numbers or Roles — Movement or Relocation of Planned Resources

- The variation is expressed in numbers, roles or usage by period.

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- A change occurs that is outside an acceptable range of variation.

Example: During the next stage of program or project execution, the total staffing (average) was forecast in the baseline resource plan as 75 full-time equivalents (FTEs). The collected, actual resource use numbers show that total project resource use for that stage averaged 91 FTEs. The agreed/acceptable range of variation for this specific program is plus or minus eight FTEs, and this variation is plus 16.

Events

Characteristics of events include:

- Occurrences take place during the life cycle of the project or program and are focused on such things as quality, executive understanding or major status components indicating progress.

- They are planned and included as part of the project or program schedule.

- They typically involve individuals filling roles that are external to the project or program, with participation by selected leaders or staff from the project or program.

- Examples include quality reviews for major deliverables.

Information about events and their outcomes will be of interest to those whose role has some aspect of governance or oversight for initiatives. This may include such roles or functions as an investment review board, the business strategy function, a portfolio review or management function, and/or an organizational steering group for initiatives.

Color-Coding Events by Status

A variety of events occur during the execution of a program or project. These take the form of, among others, reviews, decision-making briefings and audits of various types. For the most part, it is possible to summarize their results in terms of a simple color indicator such as red, yellow or green.

These color-code summaries are useful to identify, for example, sudden or unexpected changes in a trend for continuing reviews or events that occur multiple times during the life cycle. Such changes or trend shifts are noteworthy, particularly those categorized as red.

Reporting of color indicators to the executive level is often selective. That is, of the entire body of initiatives, specific ones are selected for reporting while others are left to be reviewed by the executive sponsor or steering committee for that initiative.

Examples of these types of events include:

- Major milestone/major deliverable reviews

- Formal executive or management reviews resulting in a decision to continue, to change, or to suspend or cancel a major initiative

- Periodic portfolio management reviews

- Risk/quality reviews or walk-through

- Financial audits

Risk Trends

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Risks are potential "states," events, or circumstances that have potential to damage or delay the work of an initiative. Risk trends are a series of risk assessments or risk issues that have arisen and have been managed to closure or mitigation.

The most valuable view of the risk landscape is a series of plotted points for risk occurrences and actual damage by type or scale. Work with executives to determine how the risk view for initiatives will be summarized and reduced to one or two simple measures. Check, in advance, that data is collected or easily available to populate these simple measures.

The value of risk-trend information resides less in its specific content, and more in alerting those who have a role in governance or oversight that something may have happened/be happening that requires attention. Change — as shown in a risk-trend analysis — is not spontaneous; rather, it is a result of multiple actions and events. It is the change pattern, itself, that must be seen as the "alert." This helps those with governance or oversight responsibilities to understand where the most needed focus is among a large group of initiatives.

Risk-related data will be of interest to those who are stakeholders in the successful outcome of a specific initiative. This may include business sponsors, executives who are "owners" of business goals linked to specific initiatives and organizational steering groups.

Examples include:

- Number of actual risk occurrences or incidents within a time period for an initiative

- Number and type of risk-related delays, changes or additional work effort within a time period for a specific initiative

- A range by numbers and types that categorizes prior risk incidents and/or delays and changes expressed in terms of stoplight colors, such as red, yellow or green

- A period of time over which these color points are plotted

Intangibles

There are aspects of a program or project that do not lend themselves to specific measurement or the reduction to numbers. Yet, these aspects often have a potential to be very damaging, and on occasion cause the termination of an initiative. Worse, the damage potential often goes unrecognized, and when problems are revealed, they are embarrassing because they are unexpected.

Many of these deal with intangible items. These include such things as the morale of the team working on the initiatives or the relative satisfaction of the initiative stakeholders at a particular time. Providing executive-level insight about these, while not simple and direct, is very important.

Use a variety of techniques. Individual, one-on-one meetings between the leaders of the initiative, the major stakeholders or the expected consumers of the results can be very productive. Anonymous surveys (truly anonymous) are helpful for gauging the scale and pervasiveness of unhappiness or dissatisfaction. Periodic round-table discussions, led by outside facilitators, are useful vehicles for getting input.

The results of this information gathering can be summarized using a color indicator as a means for attracting executive attention.

- Intangibles are not easily measured; however, they are indicators of the opinions, attitudes and responses to the progress of the program or projects, its work, and/or its deliverables on the part of those that are involved with the initiative or that will be the beneficiaries of its success.

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- Information in this space is more about subjective feedback than about "measurement."

Some examples are:

- Client satisfaction — overall

- Client satisfaction — a dimensional model, including such dimensions as the schedule, amount of work, overall quality, responsiveness and so on

- Anticipated (or actual) fit to need — measured at the conclusion of each major initiative stage and in the period following delivery

- Team morale

- Stakeholder view of potential success

RECOMMENDED READING

"An Application Development Measurement Framework"

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