

## **Executive Imperatives: Necessary Ingredients to Improve Organizational Performance**

A widespread desire to improve organizational performance may be sated by focusing on a key set of executive imperatives—necessary and high priority actions. Personal experiences reveal that an essential focus on creating excellence in people, processes, and the working environment reaps tremendous benefits and enables executives and their organizations to achieve desired objectives.

From a long career as a program manager in high tech new product development and from working with a wide variety of organizations world-wide, I observed a wealth of executive practices, some effective for improving organizational performance and many not. A distillation of executive imperatives provides fodder for achieving more optimized results.

A search for and concerted effort to improve project management is an internal activity within an organization aimed at operational effectiveness. This is a necessary but not sufficient effort to create a truly excellent organization. What is also required is an overt, explicit effort to achieve successful outcomes THROUGH project management. When executives in an organization come to recognize the importance and phenomenal contribution of project management, they benefit from bountiful harvests.

Creating excellence IN project management is the application of methodologies, viewpoints, insights, and leading practices to optimize project-based work. This goal is necessary because projects are the means to achieve almost anything in every organization. Without good project, program, and portfolio management, achieving results is tenuous. Traditional efforts are not sufficient in an environment where internal and external forces are both driving and restraining performance in an accelerating manner. Organizational maturity requires that you reduce organizational “toxins” and create “green” organizations, using a systemic approach.

### **Assess the Environment**

The imperative facing executives in all organizations is not only to embark on a quest to manage project management processes, but also to create a “green” environment that encourages project-based work and to eliminate pollutants and “toxic” actions that demotivate project managers and their teams. This means you search with unrelenting curiosity for leading practices. It also means, when these practices are revealed to you, that you are prepared to take action.

Progressively improving practices, also called organizational maturity, requires that project leaders and management reduce organizational “toxins” and create “green” organizations. “Green” in this context extends the physical, tangible thinking about project work into the non-physical, intangible personal working relationships that affect our working environments. In this sense, “green” is good.

Without the “green” foundation, organizations experience failures, overruns, and dissatisfied stakeholders. These “toxic” project environments are usually permeated by political practices

that create uneasiness and frustration among all except those who wield these negative practices with power.

A “green” view creates an environment for consistent, predictable, and sustainable success and views every project as a means to improve. The focus is on overall organizational success, not just on individual project performance. People then feel like they are constantly contributing to organizational and personal knowledge.

### **Executive Actions**

Senior managers often insist on doing things their way, even though they are new to that position or portion of the business and do not understand project management. People who apply sound project management practices and achieve consistent successes are extremely valuable, if not in scarce supply. The executive imperative is to tap the collective wisdom, recognize talented individuals within the organization, and get out of their way.

Common in many situations, projects operate with little formal control or have been given solutions to produce that were unclear or perhaps even wrong. This amounts to working on a solution in search of a problem. Such situations invariably create resistance from stakeholders. Taking time to interview key stakeholders and as many senior managers as possible surfaces real problems that need solving and identifies true definitions of success that meet stakeholder requirements.

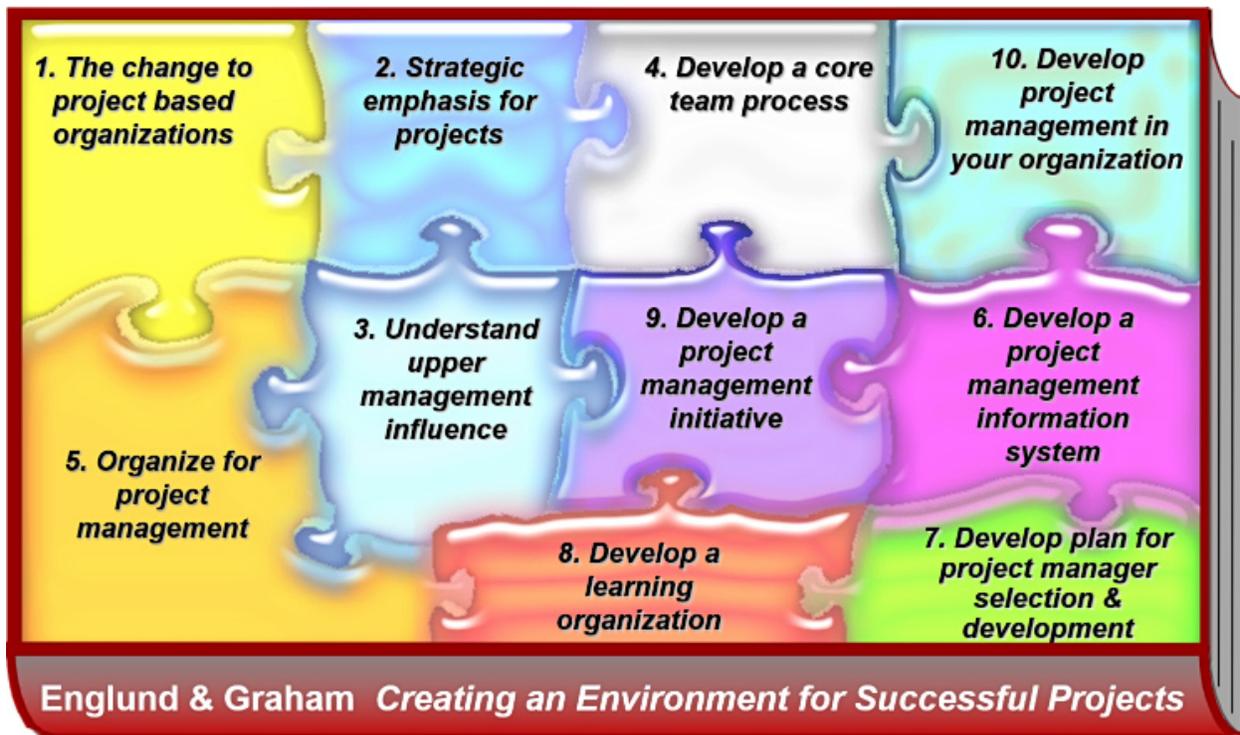
Recognize that when people accept a project assignment without a clear problem statement that everyone agrees upon, they are being set up for failure. It will take courage, time, and effort on their part to push back. Effective negotiating skills are necessary; if not present, support training to develop these essential skills.

The executive imperative is to engage in negotiations, clearly define problems, prioritize the importance of solutions to those problems, and set expectations.

Successful executives are open to coaching from below—they not only welcome these inputs but actively seek them. In order to get an agenda implemented, they know project sponsorship represents an opportunity to turn a vision into reality through a set of assigned resources

The executive imperative is to support organizational learning, even at the risk of tolerating some failures. Sponsors at all levels set the tone for how failure and learning are perceived. Take the time to share thinking, standards, and expectations. Provide appropriate rewards, not only for successes but also for failures that led to heightened understanding about risks, things to avoid, and innovative approaches. The goal is to establish higher priority for continuous learning that gets recycled into new best practices.

## Vital Ingredients



I often present ten pieces of a puzzle that comprise an environment for successful projects. The pieces, however, will not stay together without glue. The glue has two vital ingredients: authenticity and integrity. Authenticity means that managers mean what they say. Integrity means that they do what they say they will do, and for the reasons they stated to begin with. It is a recurring theme in every environment where people interact that authenticity and integrity link the head and the heart, the words and the action; they separate belief from disbelief, and they often make the difference between success and failure.

Major upheaval requires authenticity and integrity on the part of all managers. Most change efforts do not fail from lack of concepts or from lack of a description of how to do it right. Most change programs fail when managers are *hoist on their own petard* of inauthenticity and lack of integrity. This failure happens because people, when involved in the situations where managers violate authenticity and integrity, sense the lack of resolve, feel the lack of leadership, and despair of the situation. When managers speak without authenticity, they stand like the naked emperor: they think they are clothed, but everyone else sees the truth. When managers lack integrity, they do not “walk the walk,” they only “talk the talk.” People sense the disconnection and become cynical.

Management cannot ask others to change without first changing themselves. Implementing a more project-friendly environment and perhaps creating a project office depend upon resolve to approach needed changes with authenticity and integrity.

The executive imperative is to avoid “integrity crimes” that cause disconnections between beliefs and actions. An integrity crime will most likely not send you to jail but will erode all confidence that followers have in their leader.

## **Rethink Failure**

I believe we need to rethink our views about failure. Truly, the only failure is if we fail to learn from each and every project, regardless of the outcome. Assess how your organization views “failures.”

A more enlightened view that creates an environment for more consistent, predictable, and sustainable success is to be a learning organization that views every project as a means to improve. The focus is on overall organizational success, not just on individual project performance. People then feel like they are constantly contributing to organizational and personal knowledge. The point is to “get it right the last time”—meaning that experimentation, trial and error, bad ideas, foolishness, fun times, craziness, scrappiness, collaboration, and creativity—all have their space to operate, finally leading to successful outcomes.

Increased learning appears when people receive more feedback. The executive imperative and case for feedback hinges on establishing shared values and putting them into practice. The results will be extraordinary. Craft, with participation from all key stakeholders, a clear, concise, convincing, and compelling vision statement about portfolio success. Help all project and program stakeholders visualize how their roles contribute to that success. Early in each project, take the time to emphasize the importance of each person’s contribution. Make, and ask for, explicit commitments to be accountable for overall success and to extract the optimum contribution from each other. Demonstrate these values profusely every day, both by soliciting feedback from and providing it to others. Regularly recognize results that project and program teams contribute to organizational success. The executive imperative is to create an environment of support.

Much more explicit executive support is needed in modern organizations if they truly wish not only to survive but to prosper by creating value through project-based work. It may be necessary give up a sense of control in order to get results. Control, after all, is an illusion. Nature is firmly rooted in chaos. People try to convince themselves, and their bosses, that they are in control of their projects. They may come close to this illusion, and project managers usually are far more knowledgeable about the project or program than anyone else. Try as they may, however, the fact remains that far more forces are at work in our universe than people can ever understand or control. This does not relieve executives or people in their organizations of the obligation to achieve results. What should you do?

## **Take Action**

Focus on results and constant course corrections to stay on track. Capture the minimal data required to keep informed. Seek information that supports action-oriented decision-making. Just because you can capture every conceivable piece of information does not mean you should, nor can most organizations afford to do so. It is ill conceived luxuries that support “feeling

comfortable” through excessive reports and metrics. Continuous dialogue with stakeholders and reinforcing intended results helps relieve anxieties.

Establish a portfolio management process that links execution to strategic goals, defines criteria for project selection, prioritizes projects and programs, and communicates this information to all project stakeholders. Furthermore, sponsors need to engage in negotiations about objectives and constraints for each project, clearly define problems, prioritize the importance of solutions to those problems, and set expectations.

Creating excellence in project management includes upper managers creating an environment and/or project managers taking the initiative to manage the sponsor role. Sponsor activities and behaviors vary with the organization. Many studies point to the lack of good project sponsorship as a major case of difficulties and problems on projects. Well-executed sponsorship by senior executives brings better project results. Be part of a team to make this happen through a defined sponsor selection process, a development path, on-going mentoring, constructive evaluation and feedback, and applying knowledge management.

The executive imperative is to get educated on the role of project sponsorship and to set specific goals within the organization about what it means to achieve excellence in project sponsorship, such as all sponsors fully vetted through a training course, 100% of projects have sponsors assigned and active throughout the project, sponsors present summary of benefits achieved through projects and programs at a quarterly review.

## **Get Prepared**

Success starts with a strong commitment to improve. Leaders become better prepared as sponsors of major projects by taking inventory of their talents, skills, and behaviors and putting appropriate action plans in place. The executive imperative is to get educated on what project sponsorship means and to set goals for effective sponsorship that lead to excellence in project sponsorship.

The ideal situation is proactive sponsorship—having project sponsors who are committed, accountable, and serious about the project, knowledgeable, trained, and able not only to talk the talk but also to walk the walk. Such people are trustworthy in all respects. Their values are transparent and aligned with the organization and its strategy. Such sponsors protect the team from disruptive outside influences and back the team up when times are tough.

Know that results are possible but may not follow a clearly defined path. Avoid “toxic” practices that demotivate project teams. An executive imperative is to focus on creating excellence in people, processes, and a “green” working environment. Believe that these efforts will reap the results that the organization is chartered to produce. Set a goal to create excellence in project sponsorship.

Focus on creating excellence THROUGH projects, programs, and portfolios. Creating excellence through project management means achieving greater results from project-based work...which helps an organization realize competitive advantage by executing strategy through projects in a

portfolio...and significant advancements in maturity of people, processes, and the environment of a project-based organization. Consciously apply executive imperatives as necessary ingredients that make the difference for improved organizational performance. Be flexible and enjoy the ride!

*Randy Englund* is an author, speaker, trainer, professional facilitator, and consultant for the Englund Project Management Consultancy ([www.englundpmc.com](http://www.englundpmc.com)). He draws upon experiences with Hewlett-Packard Company (HP) for 22 years. He is co-author of seven books in the business and management field, teaches online graduate university certificate programs, and is a frequent seminar leader for the Project Management Institute.

