

Building a culture of project management

 By [Karen Parkin](#)

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How does a company get things done if not by project management? It has been around since the days of creating the pyramids in Ancient Egypt. Yet even today in South Africa, project management is an under-valued discipline. Even though it is not rocket science, successful projects remain as elusive as the [Scarlett Pimpernel](#).

Whether people agree with it or not, the well-known Chaos Report by the Standish Group highlights a shameful record of failure in IT projects over the years from their first report in 1994. There is an interesting debate about the validity of the report which challenges the definitions and measurement criteria used for the Chaos Report. But whether one agrees with it or not, it poses some important questions and highlights some significant observations. One of the questions is how we define success for a project.

Success is traditionally defined as completing a project on time, within the budget and with all the features specified in the scope. But is success more than that? Does it matter that the project is a few days late if it doesn't deliver the right thing? Does it matter that the project spends a bit more than budgeted, but results in an inspired and market changing solution? The Chaos Report highlights the staggering cost of failure which sits like the great big purple gorilla in the corner of the room being studiously ignored because the outcome is unbearably embarrassing.

Questions like the cost of projects started but not finished, or partially completed, the cost of doing the wrong thing, or the cost of not cancelling a project that was clearly no longer justified. The fact is that there is a cost associated with failure and most of us simply ignore the inconvenient truth of money being poured into useless effort.

The idea of 'project management' doesn't evoke excitement in most people. When one mentions it, eyes roll back in peoples' heads and they brace themselves for a process that they expect will be bureaucratic, stuffy, inflexible and long winded.

What project management should do

It's a pity that project management has acquired itself this reputation, because nothing should be further from the truth. It should liberate people to do great work. It should create the conditions where people can excel and perform. It should set the stage for people working together in synergistic teams to produce something much greater than the parts. It should establish the processes where people create solutions by solving problems and anticipating issues. It should be an inspiring environment.

Most of all project management should create a better way of doing things that is supremely professional and that nurtures

and builds professionals. It should be seen as the means for accomplishing things - even a means for achieving greatness. Instead it is seen as a stifling force that might suffocate creativity with rules, regulations and red tape.

Project management does not have to be a stuffy milieu wherein boring old farts (excuse the expression) stare at Gantt charts or network diagrams and tally up time expended vs. time planned to forecast new timelines. These are the tools, and as with any trade, project managers need to be able to wield these tools expertly with agility, dexterity and yes, with creativity too.

Project management has the potential to 'make things happen'

What is interesting about project management is its unique position and potential to 'make things happen'. And because of its potential power, it's surprising that organisations in South Africa do not embrace project management more. One longingly wonders what would happen if the government fully implemented it? Perhaps more services would be delivered. People would be held accountable for their actions and responsible for meeting objectives.

Most companies have a corporate culture. Even if it is not specifically defined, the culture of a company is that ethereal thing that hangs in the air and describes the way things get done in a company. Corporate culture defines how people treat each other, their attitudes to their work, their customers, how they communicate, and how they do their work. It is a set of beliefs, attitudes, values and assumptions that are shared by and that shapes the behaviour of the people in an organisation.

If we were to develop a project culture in an organisation, how might that look?

Here are some of the behaviours and signs that a project culture is present:

- People have a healthy respect for the time and money spent on a project. Both are tracked.
- The project prioritisation process aligns projects with corporate strategies and business objectives.
- The organisation does everything it can to ensure that projects succeed.
- Change is not feared in the organisation because the organisation has a means of responding to and managing change.
- The majority of time in the organisation counts towards the successful delivery of projects.
- The company celebrates and shares successes.
- Project Management best practices are defined and implemented across the organisation.
- Top management are interested in and want to know about the status of projects.
- People management is superb.
- The 'right' reporting and organisational structures are in place to support successful projects.
- The 'right' Performance Management System is in place to recognise work performed on projects.
- People practice active listening and systems thinking.
- Project managers are valued in the organisation. The right people are identified to become project managers. They are leaders and communicators who can think holistically. They are trained in project management.
- The 'right' tools and methodologies are in place and the processes are implemented company-wide. People are trained in these tools.
- People work together as a team. 'I' gives way to 'we' in the vocabulary of the organisation.
- There is a shared commitment by teams to successful outcomes.
- People deliver what they promise. They return calls when messages are left for them.
- Frequent and meaningful collaboration with stakeholders and sponsors takes place.

Cultures such as described above can't be bought. They must be built from the ground up and driven from the top down within an organisation. But together they build an organisation of mature professionalism within which creativity, innovation, and excellence will thrive.

ABOUT KAREN PARKIN

Karen Parkin is co-founder and director of digital strategy and training company Britefire (www.britefire.co.za). She has been at the forefront of innovation through her whole career and she is at home in a world that is in a constant state of flux, uncertainty and invention. Contact her on tel +27 (0)21 790 0303, email karen.parkin@britefire.com, follow @karenoparkin on Twitter and connect on LinkedIn.

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