Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects
Driving to Successful Completion

Reach for the Finish Line

A project faces many hazards on its journey toward completion. Think of the times when one of your projects began with great plans and excitement, but soon became hopelessly bogged down. Customers made late changes to requirements, the scope crept, politics and poor communications caused massive confusion, and decision-makers procrastinated on critical issues and tradeoffs.

Close the Loop

Even with a solid foundation of good planning, the *execution and control* phase of a project can be very dangerous*.* To survive, manage the execution phase with *closed loop corrective action (CLCA).*

W. Edwards Deming made the idea of CLCA famous in his influential work on quality and continuous improvement. Applying CLCA to the execution and control of projects leads to the five continuous steps shown in figure 1. Keep the CLCA wheel turning smoothly during your project's execution with the following seven tips. (For tips on planning, see the previous article "Is Planning Useless?")

Seven Tips for Success

1 **Measure Progress.** In many ways, running the execution phase of a project is like sailing a schooner. Ancient mariners took navigation sightings frequently so they knew their location on the vast, featureless seas. Similarly, you must know where your

projects are. Instead of using octants and star sightings, you can use progress measurement tools. Select from the many popular measurement tools, which vary in formality and complexity to fit the needs of your project.

Formal measurement tools include milestone charts, jogging lines, variance charts, and earned value. Supplement these with informal measurement tools, such as Management by Walking Around. You can read more about informal measurement in the previous article "Glance Management."

2 **Steer.** Measuring progress is vital, but it isn't enough to keep mariners safe. They must compare their location to their project plan – in this case, the course they have laid out – and correct their ship's course to avoid sailing into dangerous regions.

Similarly, project leaders steer projects by applying corrective action tools to get their projects back onto a good course. Author Eric Verzuh calls this "rebalancing the project." Rebalancing usually involves changing at least one
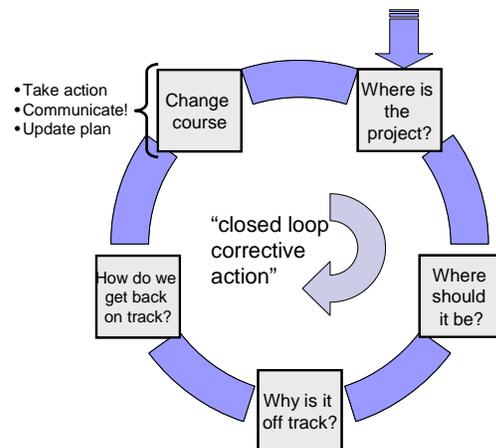

Figure 1: CLCA for Controlling Project Execution

element of the triple constraint – time, resources, or scope.

3 **Communicate and Energize!** My clients and students confirm that effective communication is a major factor in determining whether a project is successful. Spend a lot of your time facilitating communication during the execution phase. Here are some communication considerations:

- *What:* Communicate broadly, including vision, responsibilities, coordination, status, and authorizations.
- *How:* Who will you communicate to? Different people hear messages differently. Know your audience, and then use a variety of communication channels tailored to your audience. Watch for communication blockers, such as slang, especially on virtual or diverse teams.
- *When:* Once is not enough in a busy work environment, so communicate key messages many times – say it until you're sick of it!

As you can see, communication requires careful advance thinking as well as great persistence.

4 **Build Commitment.** Sea-going captains know that they must build and maintain the commitment of their crew during a voyage. Just like a smart captain invests in a key stakeholder group (the crew) to prevent mutiny, project leaders must invest in project stakeholders. Here are four simple steps to identify key stakeholders and build their commitment.

- Identify and prioritize stakeholders.
- Understand what motivates them and what they want from your project.

- Determine how you can meet their needs while at the same time getting what your project needs from them.
- Using your knowledge, build and act on a plan to get them aligned.

The previous article "Stakeholder Commitment" describes the complete commitment-building process.

5 **Anticipate roadblocks.** First, prevent fires. The most effective leaders constantly survey the horizon during project execution to detect potential obstacles long before they can derail the project.

- Constantly think about what could go wrong. Identify likely or high impact problems before they happen.
- Take pre-emptive action to prevent them.

Second, fight the fires you didn't prevent. Despite your prevention efforts, stuff will happen anyway.

- Be prepared with contingency plans. Monitor closely, then pull the trigger decisively.
- Mobilize sponsors and project team members to remove the obstacles or steer the project around them.
- Don't reward arsonists!

For more information on using risk management to anticipate roadblocks, see the articles "Stuff Happens: Dealing with Risks" and "Advanced Risk Management."

6 **Maintain Forward Motion.** Before the days of mechanical propulsion, sailing ships could be "caught in irons," becalmed for weeks. Sometimes projects feel the same way – caught in irons that prevent forward motion, becalmed on the seas of indecision or politics.

Figure out what is causing your project to stall, whether it is lack of focus, ignoring tough issues, or procrastinating on difficult decisions. Then, as a VP I know says, "Grab the hot potato!" Design an appropriate solution and break through the roadblock.

> If you can't fly, then run.
> If you can't run, then walk.
> If you can't walk, then crawl.
> But whatever you do, keep moving.
> 　　　　　　　Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
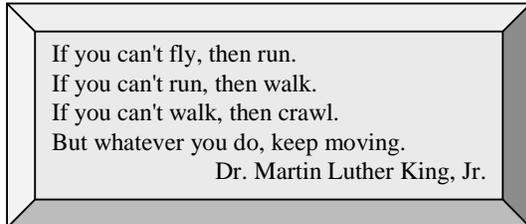
7 **Control what's in and what's out.** Change can be valuable. Organizations that react rapidly to change have a competitive edge. Change is also inevitable – prohibiting it doesn't work.

However, uncontrolled change causes chaos that nourishes scope creep. Use a change control system to manage the value and cost of change.

- Decide what changes you are going to formally monitor and control. Start with aspects of the triple constraint – schedule, cost, and scope or features.
- Clearly define responsibilities and steps to follow. Who will identify, investigate, and make decisions on potential changes?
- Make your change control system simple and agile instead of a big bureaucratic framework.

Endpoint

Good planning is the foundation for a successful project, but effective execution is crucial, too. These seven tips will help you drive your projects successfully to the finish line, avoiding the many hazards that threaten it.

Previous articles in this series give more detail on many of these tips. You can find an archive of these articles at http://www.spspro.com/SPS_cases_papers.htm

About the Author

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