Influencing Without Authority: Rev up your Internal Consulting Skills

Part 1: Why Don't we have More Influence?

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Industry Article

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How often have you met with business clients to plan a project or elicit their requirements only to have them provide you with their solution? And because they have already given their solution, they can't understand why you want to spend any time shaping the product or defining their requirements! Or, perhaps your sponsor or business clients are at the opposite end of the spectrum. They may be overly busy, stressed-out, and distracted, and again don't have time to define their real needs, or to articulate their detailed requirements.

Many project managers (PMs) and business analysts (BAs) find themselves facing this dilemma. Frequently, and for various reasons, we are unable or afraid to ask too many questions of sponsors and business clients to determine real business needs behind stated solutions or problems. Project time pressures also force us to produce tangible outcomes, often too quickly, and the outputs of project plans and requirements documents are rarely considered 'real' progress!

This two-part article addresses these common quandaries and provides a framework for rethinking how to handle business problems and opportunities. It makes a case for "doing the right thing" by taking a consultative approach to work that will better provide internal clients what they truly need and want. The framework is straightforward, yet will reduce the amount of time you hear these dreaded words from clients: "Oh, darn, you gave me what I asked for!" It offers tips on how to respectfully question key stakeholders about their real needs and provide recommendations that best meet their business objectives. All in all, the benefits of this approach are to reduce the amount of rework on projects, saving time, money, and greatly improving client satisfaction.

The Need for Influence

Influence

So, what is influence and why do we want it? Influence is the ability to sway others, to cause them to affect change. Business professionals today are motivated to do an outstanding job and to make a difference in their organizations like never before. With that desire and spirit comes the determination to influence business and project outcomes in unprecedented ways. Organizations also contribute to the phenomenon by being perpetually short-staffed, requiring people to perform many different jobs and take on additional responsibility. For example at one of our major clients, project managers typically function as program managers, and business analysts perform many traditional project management tasks.

In situations in which people must perform duties at a level higher than the authority of their position allows, conflicts and other tensions frequently arise. When PMs and BAs are expected to produce change in their organizations through projects, they often lack the authority needed to "make it happen." However, when business partners abdicate their responsibility on projects, then later blame the project participants when projects fail to deliver, conflict and discouragement can result.

One of the ways we can influence change is to act as consultants as we gather requirements. This paper discusses how we can be consultants to the business to ensure that complete requirements are gathered and that the project outcome meets the business needs. We call that "Doing the Right Thing."

The Scary Truth

To put into perspective the need for a better way of handling project requests, managing requirements, and ultimately making customers happy, consider these facts:

- A study found the total percentage of project budget due to requirements defects is 25 to 40 percent and costs the U.S. economy $59.5 billion annually.[1]
- According to the same study, reworking requirements defects on most software development projects costs 40 to 50 percent of total project effort.[1]
- Requirements problems are among the top causes of why projects: 1) are significantly over budget and behind schedule, 2) deliver significantly reduced scope, 3) deliver poor-quality software applications, 4) are not significantly used once delivered, and 5) are cancelled.[1]
- "Poorly defined applications have led to a persistent miscommunication between business and IT that largely contributes to a 66% project failure rate for these applications, costing U.S. businesses at least $30B every year."[2]
- "Communication challenges between business teams and technologists are chronic — we estimate that 60%-80% of project failures can be attributed directly to poor requirements gathering, analysis, and management."[3]
- 56% of defects can be attributed to requirements, and 82% of all rework effort is to fix defects.[4]
- Lack of User Involvement and Executive Support are consistently the #1 and #2 reasons for failed projects. Together, they account for 33% of the factors behind failed projects.[5]

Barriers to Effective Project Influence

1. Lack of Authority

PMs and BAs often don't have the ultimate authority to ensure appropriate solutions are found and implemented. And, if we can't influence it to happen, there is a strong likelihood of rework occurring. So, the only alternative left to us is to try and influence the right thing without the corresponding authority. The two types of influence available to us are using our expertise (expert) and our leadership (personal power).

It's Easy to have Influence *with* Authority

The quick road to influence in organizations is through authority and positional power. Consider figure 1:

Authority → **Positional Power** → **Influence**

Figure 1. The quick route to influence.

PMs and BAs have control over project planning, execution, and documenting/managing requirements. But, as a rule, we have little direct power over the business to ensure there is adequate time for discovering requirements or to keep sponsor support.

To summarize this discussion on authority, BAs and PMs have little direct power and authority on projects. Without needed influence, projects will probably have rework and not accomplish what they are supposed to, because of the pressures and other environmental factors. At the same time, business leaders continue to be frustrated by the delays and reduced functionality of challenged projects.

2. Lack of Sponsor Support

It's difficult to effectively influence without executive support. If our sponsors are too dominant or too weak, it's harder for us to positively influence the project. As previously stated, lack of executive support for projects is one of the top factors behind failed or challenged projects. There are three general types of sponsors who are the most challenging to deal with on projects: Consider figure 2.

Sponsor Type	Extreme Case	Sample Dialog
Dominant Sponsors	Tell us EXACTLY what they want, then blame us when the solutions don't work	• "We need an ERP System!" • "I want you to add a field to the XYZ table so I can get a new column on my ABC report"

Weak Sponsor	Come to us for solutions, but then often don't like the ones we develop	• "I'm too busy to review these requirements…you go ahead – I TRUST you" • "I dunno…what do YOU think we should do?"
"Missing" Sponsors	Are present only in name or at project kick-off. To fill the void, we guess and/or tell THEM what they're going to get, both of which are risky	• "You need a new Order Entry system because the old database will no longer be supported by IBM" • "We need a project to convert the Customer Management System from Cold Fusion to Java"

Figure 2. Challenging Sponsor Types.

3. Unclear Roles and Responsibilities

If project managers and business analysts are perceived as "gophers" or order-takers, their influence could well be reduced. Also, even when business clients seem to abdicate their authority, influence is not automatically assigned to the PM or BA. Often, when PMs and BAs step in and assume decision-making, they end up "owning" the project and outcome, and often are blamed when the product does not work satisfactorily. One of the most common areas of confusion is the project charter, or project initiation type of document. When project managers or business analysts develop the charter, the team ends up taking at least partial ownership of it. That ownership brings a level of responsibility for the project that should rest with the business partner.

Another widespread blurring of responsibilities is approving changes to requirements. When BAs or PMs control scope on a project, and approve or deny changes to scope, they assume the responsibility of the project owner. The result of this approach can range from rigidity (which can cause lack of desired functionality) to rampant scope creep (with cost and time overruns).

4. Other Factors

Other barriers to effective influencing can include:

- Company culture. Hierarchical communications and styles tend to prohibit influencing without authority.
- Product complexity. The more complex a product, the more the PM or BA will need to have product expertise. Learning new products can inhibit the ability to influence; however, without that expertise, the PM's credibility is greatly reduced.
- Lack of time to meet with the right people to help clients discover and verify their requirements.
- Lack of participation or inconsistent participation by the business. It's hard to influence when clients refuse to take ownership for their final product.

To be Continued

In this article we focused on the problems presented by a lack of influence, and insights into why those problems typically occur. The main factors we've experienced include lack of positional authority, lack of sponsor support, unclear roles and responsibilities, and other factors such as company culture, product complexity, time pressures, etc. In Part 2 of this article, look for some practical ways to overcome the barriers to influence that affect project professionals.

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