DOES PROJECT MANAGEMENT SUPPORT INNOVATION, OR STIFLE IT?

Successful CEO’s are clear about the role of innovation in their companies: it is pivotal. But that leads to an important question for project managers. Where does project management fit in this equation? Does it drive innovation? Or does the emphasis on repeatable and predictable processes tend to stifle it?

Project managers argue the emphasis on standard, repeatable processes facilitates the implementation of change, that project management is in fact the engine that propels innovation to its intended destination: new markets, and increased revenues and profits. If only that were true!

The reality in many companies is sharply different. The well-intended push for standardization manifests itself as forms and templates and management reviews, and forms and templates and management reviews, and... Well before long, a real bureaucracy emerges.

Certainly, project management should be about doing things faster, better, cheaper. Regrettably, project managers, with their penchant for detail, tend to optimize the process, rather than the result. Nothing illustrates this more starkly than PMI’s OPM3. This standard, which is “designed to be easy to understand and use”, defines an incredible 586 best practices and 2100 capabilities. I doubt any CEO would be enamored with having to fine tune 586 processes before embarking on a quest for innovation.

And what about the discipline of project management itself? Is it open to innovative approaches, or mired in the business practices of the 20th century?

Clearly, much of the attention in the past few decades has been devoted to defining and codifying the “body of knowledge”, necessary and time-consuming work in the developmental stage of a new profession. The problem for project management, as opposed to the mature professions, is that this development is occurring within a rapidly changing business environment. Further, the body of knowledge, as it exists today, tends to be based on two premises:

- “Plan before do”, and
- “Minimize change after the ‘do’ begins.”

Conversely, innovation encourages change, and often requires some “do” before planning is even possible.

The landscape is not entirely bereft of new ideas, some of which specifically attack project management’s tendency to focus on the process to the detriment of the result: critical chain, agile project management, and lean concepts, for example. Unfortunately, these approaches have been treated largely as digressions by mainstream project management.

Not surprisingly, Peter Morris, Professor of Construction and Project Management at University College, London, and the recipient of PMI's Research Achievement Award for 2005, asserts “project management is a discipline caught in a 1960’s time warp.”

Clearly, project management cannot continue to command the popularity it enjoys today unless it is seen as relevant in the 21st century. And to be seen as relevant, it must earn a reputation as the agent of change, not the protector of the status quo.

Project management can be an agent of change. That is where we started, back in the 1950’s. And in a world characterized by innovation and speed to market, figuring how to reposition ourselves squarely in that space becomes an imperative. It could well mean the difference between survival and extinction.