Coping with the Vagaries of Project Management

As the pace of change accelerates, change management is becoming more and more important. Project Management is all about effectively coping with change.

Most working people have been or will be involved with projects because they are involved with change. Therefore, the business of project management is becoming more and more important.

Many of the older generation of project managers “fell” into the role with very little preparation and even less training. The current generation is more likely to choose project management as a crucial part of their career. They are “aspirational” rather than “accidental”. Project management qualifications are now an important to any ambitious manager.

As project management is as much an art as it is a science, a key question is: “How do we educate project managers in the art and practice of project management? How can we encourage them to feel the fear and the pain involved?”

While the science and the theory can be learned from lectures, reading and discussion, the art requires practice. One way of providing practice, without undue cost or risk, is through simulation.

Simulations allow the educator to provide some of the experience and practice that project managers need. It provides a relatively safe environment in which to experience difficulty and make mistakes.

Simulations, to be effective, need to be as realistic as practicable, both in types of problems and issues and in the way they are presented to those involved with the simulation. They also need to exercise the full range of skills that PMs need – not just the “hard” matters of estimating, budgeting and scheduling but also the “soft” skills of communicating with and managing team and client. The scenarios presented in the simulations also need to have a deal of ambiguity and uncertainty while still giving participants enough information to make decisions.
Simulations Treatment

The simulation involves the full twelve weeks of the course. Elements in the simulation are: preparing a proposal for the client, accepting the project, preparing the project plan, and executing the project.

During the execution of the project, various events happen which alter the course of the project execution. The events are presented to the participants in various ways: by messages (phone, email) and by scenarios which are presented by electronic animations. In the illustration above, for example, the project sponsor is requesting a change of scope from the project manager. As this is the first scenario in the simulation, students are given a few hints to work with.

Each week, the project team meets with the “client”, in a “Project Steering Committee” meeting. The “client”, in fact, is another of the project teams in the group.

The project team presents the standard reports usually provided in project meetings: progress, status and forecast. The clients role play the various stakeholders, asking probing questions about the team’s management of events.

Assessment of the project execution is peer-to-peer. The “client” group in the committee meetings assesses the project team on a number of criteria provided in a marking guide.

Tools and technologies used in the simulation are:
- Media Semantic Character Builder (for scenario animations)
- Electronic mail system (messages used to provide the “events”)
- RMIT Learning Hub (Blackboard) for:
  - Hosting electronic animations
  - Hosting voice message system
  - Wiki – used by students for project documentation

Tutors need to be proactive in encouraging students to gain the greatest benefit from role-playing.

Future Plans

Development of simulations for a wide range of project management case studies.

Formal evaluation of Project Management simulation to identify and improve effectiveness.

Evaluation

Members of the course are asked to participate in a survey at the end of the simulation. The survey instrument in printed form, involved 34 questions: 5 point scale and free-form text. Results of the surveys conducted to date are still being evaluated.