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Keep the Change

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An international IT project management veteran (and poet) shares some thoughts on the importance of change management, including why so many companies do it poorly and how it can enhance instead of stifle creative thinking. Indeed, embracing projects in flux is the only way to move your agenda forward in turbulent times.

After years of managing international IT projects within large corporations and multicultural environments, Crispin "Kik" Piney, PgMP, is now a freelance consultant and principal at Project-Benefits.com, a project management consultancy based in Valbonne, France. Piney is also a lecturer with ESI International and a noted speaker on all aspects of project management, from cost control to change management. He most recently presented at the PMI Global Congress in Amsterdam May 18-20.

Piney recently spoke with **ProjectsAtWork** about how change management is not only critical to achieving project goals, it must be kept alive throughout the lifecycle of an organization. He even shared a Haiku on the interrelated subjects of change, stakeholders and impossible missions.

Why is change management so important?

Before answering that question, I would like to make sure we understand that the term "change" is used in at least three different ways in projects: there is the change the project is designed to bring about (let's call this "created change") and then there is the fact that the definition of what is being delivered may change ("scope change") and, thirdly, the way in which we intend to do it may change ("work change").

Take as an example the project for a new building: the created change is that there will be a building where none existed previously; the initial intent may be that it should provide office space, but pressure from powerful stakeholders adds the need for it to be a significant tourist attraction (scope change). This scope change entails modifying the plans and the way in which they will be carried out (work change).

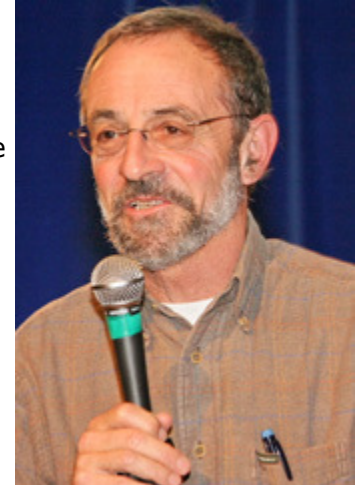
Why are so many companies so bad at it?

Each category of change needs to be addressed differently. First, there can be resistance to created change. As we all know from Newton's laws, to every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Unless this is taken into account from the start and managed throughout the project, the project may be delayed or driven off-track — with the corresponding increases in cost and loss of credibility.

Secondly, the detailed requirements are hardly ever available at the very start of the project so scope change is inevitable. As in the example above, scope change generally entails work change, and the impact of this on time and cost needs to be evaluated in order to assess whether the scope change would be worthwhile.

Work change is of course where the actual impacts to time and cost occur. The amount of rework and the level of sunk costs (i.e. work already completed that has to be written-off) depend not only on the change, but also on the phase in the project at which the change would occur — changing the color of the paint on the walls is less expensive to do before the walls have been painted in the first place.

The impact of the resistance to created change is not sufficiently addressed by most companies in their initial planning. This means that they have to deal with these effects — i.e. multiple requests for scope changes – reactively. This puts additional, and often intolerable, pressure on their change management processes. Although most companies do have a change management process, political expediency, pressure of time and lack of commitment by those responsible for administering the process can undermine its effectiveness.



As a final point, even when a change has been accepted for valid reasons, it often happens that the work changes that it entails are not designed and integrated into the existing plans with the same care that was devoted to the plans in the first place: the schedule needs to be re-optimized, assumptions need to be revisited, risks need to be reassessed. This is a lot of work, but if it is not done the quality of the planning, and therefore the chances of success, degrade with each accepted change. Most companies do not understand this well enough to insist on formal reviews of modified plans.

Your research into the Scottish Parliament Building project is a great case study. At the heart of it, what went wrong and why? Could good change management have altered the outcome?

Unfortunately, the management of the Scottish Parliament project provided lessons on the dangers of bypassing best practices in all of the areas of project management. The reports carried out by the Scottish Audit Office presented a clear analysis of the situation at several points within the project, and provided recommendations in a number of areas — the first issue being the lack of a formally accepted plan. The concept of change management cannot even exist until a plan has been created!

You have worked in multicultural, cutting-edge environments, including the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva and Digital Equipment Corporation in the United Kingdom and France. How has that affected your thinking on change management?

The strategic goals of the two organizations are vastly different: CERN's business is fundamental physics, finding out what the universe is made of and how it works; Digital Equipment was a commercial organization developing computing equipment and services. However, both organizations relied on inventiveness, creativity, commitment and teamwork to achieve their goals.

Although my previous replies may give the impression that I would like to see change management used to limit creativity, this is definitely not the case. The goal is to provide an environment which minimizes wasted effort and rework: retracing your path out of a dead-end is so much less creative than finding ways of avoiding the dead-end in the first place. The goal of change management is to enhance productive creativity.

Are companies that fit that profile (lots of different voices, always seeking new ways of

doing things) inherently better at change management?

They are certainly better at accepting change — i.e. the first category, “created change.” There are risks, however, and, although this was not the case for CERN or Digital Equipment, excessive desire for novelty can lead an organization to change direction before ever achieving the goal they set themselves — what I would name Organizational Hyperactivity Disorder! So, although creative organizations encounter much less resistance to change in the first place, an ongoing effort may be required to keep the stakeholders aligned to the mission. This can be considered to be an integral part of the change management process.

You are becoming known, it seems, for your project management poetry. Can we pressure you into sharing an original haiku?

I understand that the Haiku should also be aligned to the season, so here goes:

Summer (Unmanageable created change: do not undertake impossible missions)

*If the heat's too great,
Resist the idea of change
And leave the kitchen.*

Autumn (a manner of getting the stakeholders aligned to the mission):

*The low-hanging fruit
Helps sell the value of change.
Pray it's not rotten.*

Winter (the need for a plan)

*Without direction
The compass never points North.
Change becomes chaos.*

Spring (the need to select the beneficial change)

*Ideas for changing:
Most blossoms fall from the trees.
What's left will bear fruit.*

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