

Informative and opinion article

IS IT THE TIME FOR “CHANGE MANAGEMENT” TO CHANGE?

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“Books are never meant to speak, yet they do when the reader understands the message embodied in the text.”

Change in projects is an inevitable event. Given its unavoidable nature, effective change management is one of the key enablers of project success. Not surprisingly, a lack of proper change management often results in chaos and all sorts of problems for the projects.

The concept of change management dates back to 1951 when Kurt Lewin presented his model of change management. Since then, the concept has evolved. For the purpose of clarity, change is defined as “a process of re-aligning of people, resources, and culture” (Carr et al. 1996, cited in Al-Sedairy, 2001). Whereas, change management is defined as “the act of controlling the organizational change process by means of competent management” (Al-Sedairy, 2001).

From a project management (PM) standpoint, change management is about evaluating, approving, or rejecting changes that come into the project. Often, the process is considered well defined with a group of people working as part of a “Change Control Board” deal with changes being submitted to the project.

However, change management in PM is predominantly a reactive process. Project organizations typically react to changes as soon as the changes are lodged with the project. The project organizations that use an agile approach for PM deal with change differently. But, let’s not forget that the use of agile is not yet widespread and predominantly suited to software development projects.

The situation necessitates reflection and re-thinking about the effectiveness of change management and its role in project success for all types of projects, including traditionally and non-traditionally delivered projects. It raises the question: Is it time for “change management” to change?

While it is not an easy question to answer, given the experience of using an agile approach for PM and treatment of “change management” in agile delivery, there are things to consider to make change management more effective and relevant to the current PM context. With that in mind, below we look at some of the reasons for “change management” to change.

47

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WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT TO CHANGE?

Change management is an outdated concept

Typically, in a traditional PM context, change management is a reactive process. Project organizations receive changes and process them through their official mechanisms, such as a “change control board.” This approach creates tension between the client and the project organization as client requirements can change. In particular, in cases where the project organization is not performing well and the project is delayed, changes could be expected and need to be taken care of. However, if the project organization does not consider submitted changes judiciously and creates hurdles in accepting and implementing changes, then it is not healthy and helpful from the client’s perspective. So, in hindsight, a largely reactive change management process is outdated.

Change is desirable, not a burden

We live in a fast-paced world. Technology and the business environment are always changing. It means changes in client requirements will be a realistic expectation more often than not. Further, when a client is investing in a project, s/he is investing to earn a return on investment (ROI). As such, it is desirable that the project organization be able to adjust to the needs of the client on an ongoing basis, so that the product/service or result of the project is commensurate with the current market environment and is able to generate the desired ROI for the client. What it means is that the changes are desirable and not a matter of burden.

Project teams should proactively seek changes rather than be reactive to changes

Projects using an agile approach embrace changes and consider changes and their implementation critical to the success of the project. However, the use of an agile approach is not yet widespread, and projects are predominantly delivered based on traditional PM philosophies. It is therefore appropriate that traditional PM should embrace the way change management is done in agile for project delivery. It also means that project teams using traditional PM should proactively seek changes rather than just be reactive to them.

Client/Sponsor consider change a given

Another important reason for “change management” to change is that the clients consider changing a given thing. For clients, it is their right to ask for changes and a routine matter. However, project organizations don’t see it that way and consider change management risky, which could even result in project failure. Given the fact that projects are delivered for the clients, the clients’ interests are of paramount importance and one that cannot be ignored. It also points to the need for “change management” to change.

The mindset towards PM is changing

As the influence of PM is expanding and it is used in every sector of the economy, it is becoming more sophisticated as well. The increased focus on projects is resulting in a mindset change towards how PM should be done. More and more people are acquiring PM skills, and expectations about the utility of PM are on the rise. Such a scenario necessitates flexibility and adaptability to ensure PM remains a relevant approach for project delivery. Naturally, it means maximising value for the client. Adapting to client needs is imperative, hence the emphasis on the need for “change management” to change.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Modern-day PM and the concept of change management are like twins as they seem to have been born around the same time, i.e., the 1950s. Not surprisingly, there is a close nexus and bond

between the two. As PM is evolving, in hindsight, there is a need for change management to change too. On the back of experience of using agile for PM, there are opportunities for a change in mindset towards “change management” for broader project delivery.

With that in mind, we have looked at some reasons for “why is there a need for change management to change?” Needless to say, the reasons put forward here are just to initiate some thought processes and by no means are conclusive or exhaustive. One solution that could help “change management” to change is for clients to set aside time and budget for the changes, so that when they submit the changes, they (clients) are ready to provide some leeway to project teams to consider the changes favourably and take appropriate actions.

Reference

Al-Sedairy, S. T. (2001). A change management model for the Saudi construction industry. *International journal of project management*, 19(3), 161-169.