

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT – Some home truths (1)

Projects are increasingly the way work is being done in business today. Anything other than routine ‘business as usual’ activity is tackled using the catch all term ‘project’. The explosion of project work across all organisations means that being able to run and participate in successful projects is no longer the specialist domain of a few highly qualified project managers; everyone needs to understand what it takes to succeed.



Gerry McAuley has spent most of his professional career helping our clients succeed with their project work and in a series of articles in the coming months he will outline a few home truths that will help you ensure your projects deliver on time, in full, to budget **and** grow your people’s capabilities. This article focuses on one of the key foundations required for success: clarity of purpose.

### Truth One – There is never a right way of doing the wrong thing

Research into failed projects, my own wisdom and hindsight show that most go wrong at the beginning. Projects need to be selected with real care and be subjected to quality thinking to make sure that there is a big enough answer to the ‘why bother’ question? All projects compete for people’s time, energy and enthusiasm and, in all organisations, this is a very competitive market,

which is about to get even more competitive as we haul ourselves out of recession. The answer to the why bother question has to be clear and compelling to all who need to give their time and energy, otherwise the project will falter and fail.

Sounds so obvious, don’t you think? Why then is it so often overlooked? Why do I hear so many project team members and even some project leaders question the need and the legitimacy of their project and bemoan the fact they cannot get access to much needed resource, usually key people’s time? When people say they have not got the time what they are really saying is, I don’t see the priority over everything else I am being asked to do. We all have the same number of hours in a day, so all claims on ‘no time’ are in fact challenges to the purpose of the project.

These symptoms of poorly framed purpose are common and felt by many. The root cause is usually reluctance, often fuelled by a lack of courage or lack of real understanding that prevents any real challenge to the leaders who originate the projects. Their thinking too often goes unchallenged. There is nothing quite as dangerous in business as a single idea, firmly held by a senior leader, that gets communicated in haste. Such leaders often lack the skill, desire or time (they see it as unimportant) to communicate their reasoning to the relevant people in a compelling way, and consequently the reason ends up being communicated as a dictate. The

CEO/CFO/COO etc wants it done – becomes the rationale and mantra, which is used as a blunt instrument to extract enthusiasm, personal energy and commitment from team members. This might work in the short term, but throughout the life of a project it begins to wear thin as other dictates descend from on high.

Another factor at work at the start of a project is commonly a culture of “busyness”, encouraging a headlong dash to get going and do something, and be seen to be doing something, quickly.

Of course, the desire for action and an ability to implement quickly is a real strength and an effective competitive weapon for many organisations rightly proud of their track record in this aspect of project management. So the answer does not lie in any long, drawn out process for deciding to approve a project. After all, a day lost

at the beginning of a project hurts just as much as a day lost at the end.

What is needed is clarity of thinking **and** clarity of communication, so the project is clearly linked back to a suitable strategic mandate that is unassailable when challenged. This is a skill that needs to be developed and honed by the originators or sponsors of the projects. Their ability to communicate in a clear and compelling way why we are doing this project and what success looks like will help get projects off to the best possible start more than anything.



In the next Sensei from Sensei I will explore the **project mobilisation step**, another key ingredient of success and a graveyard for many failed projects.

*Gerry McAuley, Senior Associate, Sensei UKE – October 2010*



Sensei is an international consulting firm that helps their clients deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

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We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ...

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