

Pioneering Project Process: Methodology Maverick on a budget

Many of us who manage software development projects believe that good process is essential in guaranteeing predictable results. Running without process and control is high risk. Let's be clear here, unless you have a highly experienced team, trying to run a complex development project without process will often lead to disaster.

This attitude or understanding is not universal in the business or IT world however; a manager trying to put process in place will often face skepticism and perhaps opposition. One often heard objection is: "I don't want them wasting time writing documents, they should be developing code". In this type of environment, a PM is likely to have problems getting the budget or support to put process in place.

Getting the buy-in to try something new or harder yet, budget to buy a commercial methodology is hard. In these tough economic times, it may be impossible. So how do you start using process in your projects when faced with these types of obstacles?

Using your own initiative, you can put in place processes which can improve the success of your projects. You will demonstrate your drive for improvement, your leadership and you will deliver better results.

Here are some suggestions on how to start.

- Use public domain resources - There are low cost and public domain resources available. Agile processes are all public domain and very much in vogue. Procedures, templates and examples for almost every area of project management are available on the internet. Few of these documents can be used as is but they can make an excellent starting point. You can combine information from different sources to create tools that are right for your environment. An example of a public domain methodology is Prince2 which is widely used in the UK and parts of Europe. There are also many other sources ranging from university sites to PM sites to government sites around the world that publish example documents. A web search on something such as "design document template" can yield some interesting examples.
- Take the initiative - As the project manager you usually have the authority to define how your project will be run. So, decide that you will use some new processes on your next project. Often you don't need permission to add small process related tasks such as design reviews, iterative phases or code walkthroughs to your project. If your project is delivered successfully, you will probably have more leeway next time.
- Build your own - All methodologies, even commercial ones, need to be tailored to the specific environment where they will be used. It is not far from tailoring a methodology to building your own. The process you define for your project can be large or small as appropriate to your company's environment.

Research and Plan!

- Read up
- Learn from the masters
- Get buy in from the team
- Use public domain resources

- Start small - Do not think you need a fully defined, documented and approved process before you can start using it. In fact this may be a bad idea. You will be more successful if you pick one or two specific areas for improvement and concentrate on those areas. Biting off too much can result in your efforts losing steam before your process can start to improve your project results.

Trying to implement a full detailed process in one shot can be a recipe for failure. Implement one thing, ensure those higher up are aware of the benefits gained and then start on the next area.

- Remember Cost/Benefit – Process does take time so it is important to ensure that the time spent on process is producing benefits. Process is not an end in itself; time should be only spent on process

to the extent that that it produces benefit greater than the costs. If you have a 2 month project, you do not want to be spending 3 weeks writing process documents! Gear the process to the size of the project. It's what upper management will want and expect.

- Get buy in from the team – You will need the team on your side. If they are not on board, your initiative is likely to fail. Often team members will be curious and interested in new process, particularly if they are leading edge. I have had team members approach me with interest when they found out I have managed agile development. I find they are eager to try new methods but don't know how to get started. Find out where they have seen problems in the past and how they think process could help them. Then, design your new process, review with the team and get their buy-in.
- Read up - There are many books available on using process. Research some good books to decide what type of process you want to start using and which areas of process can have the greatest impact on your project and company.
- Learn from the masters - A great way to learn how process can help project delivery is to work in an environment with a well defined process or work with a successful, well organized project manager. If you see the opportunity to work in these environments, take it. Of course this may not be possible; Associations and organizations for project managers can be one way to get exposure to successful processes. What you learn will have positive applications in your future projects.
- Maximize impact - Since you will be defining this process as part of your regular duties, ensure the time you spend on the effort has the maximum impact. Try to find the areas where your organization has had problems in the past and focus on them. If testing has been a problem, you can better define the test process, if you find the code regularly needs to be reworked in the middle of the project, work on the design process. Also always keep in mind that the time that the team spends on process is time away from other tasks. Make your process lightweight and always keep the return on investment of time in mind.
- Templates - When defining your methodology, the minimum documentation required for an area is a procedure and a template for what the output of your process should look like (an example

Execute!
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Take the initiative● Build your own● Start small● Remember Cost/Benefit● Templates● Maximize impact● Document and promote your success

would be a procedure on creating a design and a design document template). Other documents such as policies and checklists can come later. In my experience the most benefit comes from good templates. A well annotated template can sometimes take the place of a procedure; templates are a good place to start.

- Document your successes – Remember to note where your process has benefited your project and be ready to promote your success at the end of the project. The more quantitative information you can present, to management,

the better. Remember to think about the information you want to have at the end of the project so you can start gathering it from the beginning. At the end of the project, present your data on how and why your efforts have resulted in a successful project.

I can attest that though there is some work involved, the benefits to your skills and success as a project manager are worth it! Your efforts will be noticed and if successful, could be imitated elsewhere in the organization. On top of that, one of the greatest benefits of this effort is that not only will you have tools to improve the success of your projects but you will also start to build your own personal methodology. Experienced project managers have a toolbox of successful techniques that they have used over the years. You will quickly see the benefit to building your own set of tools.

There is no reason that you as a project manager can't start adding more process to your projects. Starting is not necessarily difficult nor time consuming. You will find there are benefits to the output of your projects as well as in the confidence you have in what you and your team is producing. Though those outside the project management community are sometimes skeptical about the benefits of process, there is a reason it is such a constant topic for discussion in the PM world; it works. It helps project managers deliver better projects and results and best of all helps deliver better project manager careers.

Pedro Serrador, MBA, PMP, P.Eng. is a project and program management consultant and speaker to large international corporations. He specializes in technically complex and high risk projects, vendor management engagements and tailoring and implementing project management methodologies.

He holds an Hons. BSc in Physics and Computer Science from the University of Waterloo, Canada and an MBA from Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland. He is an accredited professional engineer in computer engineering and has been a PMP since 2000.

pedro@serrador.net
www.serrador.net