Giving Life to Innovation and Efficiency: The Project Management Office (PMO) of Santa Clara County

Christina Reich

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Encouraging the heart" is an essential leadership behavior, declared Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Bureau Director, Kathy Gallagher. It is a behavior that is cultivated in the participants of the BASSC program, and one of the responsibilities that participants have in sharing their knowledge when they complete the program. It is with this sentiment in mind that this case study was designed and conducted. All social services organizations are faced with challenges and opportunities—the environmental landscape is ever-changing. It is the nature of the business. In order to be responsive to our community, agencies must engage in project management that can effects change. The Project Management Office of Santa Clara County Social Services Agency provided the opportunity to study project management with the intent to learn how to take project management further; to create a culture of achieving outcomes directly linked to the business requirements and community needs while working to achieve integration across bureaus, where appropriate. In addition, this case study was conducted with an eye to change management theory. Change is difficult, but when well managed, it can lead to personal, professional, and organizational growth. Well-managed change, coupled with excellent project management, was discovered in Santa Clara County.

Christina Reich, Division Manager, Contra Costa County Employment & Human Service

Giving Life to Innovation and Efficiency:
The Project Management Office (PMO) of Santa Clara County

CHRISTINA REICH

Background

Excellent problem solving coupled with creativity often produces the proverbial good idea; but how do we determine if it truly is a good idea? And if an idea can pass a pre-determined litmus test deeming it a worthy idea, can it—and more importantly, should it—be given resources to bring the idea to fruition? That is, what criteria should be attributed to the good idea in an effort to deem it appropriate and worthy of a team to work it into reality? These are particularly relevant questions in a time when social services organizations are in a slow recovery from a devastating recession.

Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD), the second largest department in the county, has been working diligently to maximize integration of its systems and services provided by its six bureaus. These bureaus operate more than 60 programs that serve over 100,000 citizens in need of basic protection or support services each year. The majority of these services are provided to children and families, the elderly, the disabled, and to people attempting to enter or move up in the workforce, as well as those on public assistance, to whom services are mandated by federal and state laws and local ordinances.[1]

Integrating this vast array of services requires a careful look at the various projects of the organization to ensure that they are responsive to the needs of its ever-changing community, that they involve the appropriate stakeholders across bureaus, and that they leverage resources prudently. Projects that successfully achieve integration also require accountability measures to ensure they remain viable. It is with these business requirements in mind that the Project Management Office of Santa Clara County Social Services Agency was chosen as a case study. The following objectives were developed for this case study:

- Understand the standards and guidelines of the Project Management Body of Knowledge® (PMBOK) and discover how these are applied to improve business processes.
- Engage in discussions with project managers to learn about specific business solutions achieved by the Project Management Office.
- Determine if this methodology could be utilized in Contra Costa County and if so, develop a proposal to do so.

History

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, under the direction of Bruce Wagstaff, provides protective services to elder and dependent adults and children, in-home supportive services to frail or disabled adults, meals to seniors, CalFresh assistance, cash assistance to needy families, educational, employment and training services to aid recipients, and health coverage to a diverse population of approximately 1.78 million residents.[2] The Project Management Office (PMO), under the auspices of the Agency Office, is a function of Information Systems. The PMO was formed approximately ten years ago out of a necessity to automate systems. Located

---

1. http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/1549/Employment-Human-Services

2. FY2013 Fact Sheet, Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

in the heart of the Silicon Valley, Santa Clara Social Services Agency benefited from the downturn of the technology industry at that time, and recruited displaced tech workers to work to make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable members of the community.

Key Elements

Perhaps the most impressive element of the PMO concept is the system by which the office tracks the work. In an effort to more efficiently track the PMO portfolio of technology initiatives, the agency has recently implemented Microsoft Project Server 2010 as the central repository for all active, pending, and completed projects. Prior to implementation of MS Project Server 2010, tracking of projects was done by updating Excel spreadsheets that fed information into a master matrix that was updated monthly. The PMO implements a wide variety of the features available in Microsoft Project Server 2010, particularly its share point function.

To ensure that effort and resources are spent on the correct projects for the agency, an IT Steering Committee provides oversight. This body is also responsible for establishing visibility and sharing knowledge of the project portfolio from an agency-wide perspective, ensuring clear and transparent communications, and understanding the current and future resource needs of the agency. A vital role of the IT Steering Committee is to establish flexibility to change priorities on the projects that are underway to meet mandates and other unforeseeable events. This body meets weekly.

Another unique attribute of the PMO is the organizational structure. Staffing of the PMO is comprised of five project managers and one business analyst, and is supervised by the PMO manager, who also functions as a project manager and chief information officer. What is truly unique about the organizational makeup of the office is that each project manager plays a dual role—that of project manager and relationship manager. The relationship manager is assigned to a specific department in the agency, such as Aging & Adult Services, and serves as a single point of contact in the PMO for that designated department. The relationship manager is expected to become an expert in the business requirements of their assigned department, and to function as the go-to person for problem solving critical issues, bridging business planning and information systems delivery, enhancing customer service, and strengthening credibility. The relationship manager's most important role is enhancing communication between business and information systems. While all project managers are also relationship managers, it is important to note that the relationship manager is not assigned all projects attributed to the department to which they are assigned. Projects are assigned according to the manager that has the "bandwidth" to handle the project with their current load, combined with expertise of the subject matter.

Figure 1 describes the life cycle of a project. This life cycle incorporates all aspects of what is known as the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®) established by the Project Management Institute, a professional membership association. The PMBOK® is a globally recognized framework that includes standards and guides to support project, program, and portfolio management. These standards are created and updated by members and the general public in a collaborative effort to ensure that they are accurate and mature along with the profession.[3] Each aspect of this methodology is supported by comprehensive protocols that are implemented by the assigned project manager and facilitated by the relationship manager, from the identification of the problem for which the project was developed to the close of the project –a cause for celebration. During this case study, three project teams were observed: one in pre-launch phase, one in launch phase, and one in execute phase.

Success & Obstacles

With 25 projects completed last year, the PMO is a productive entity with numerous demonstrable outcomes for projects such as an automated
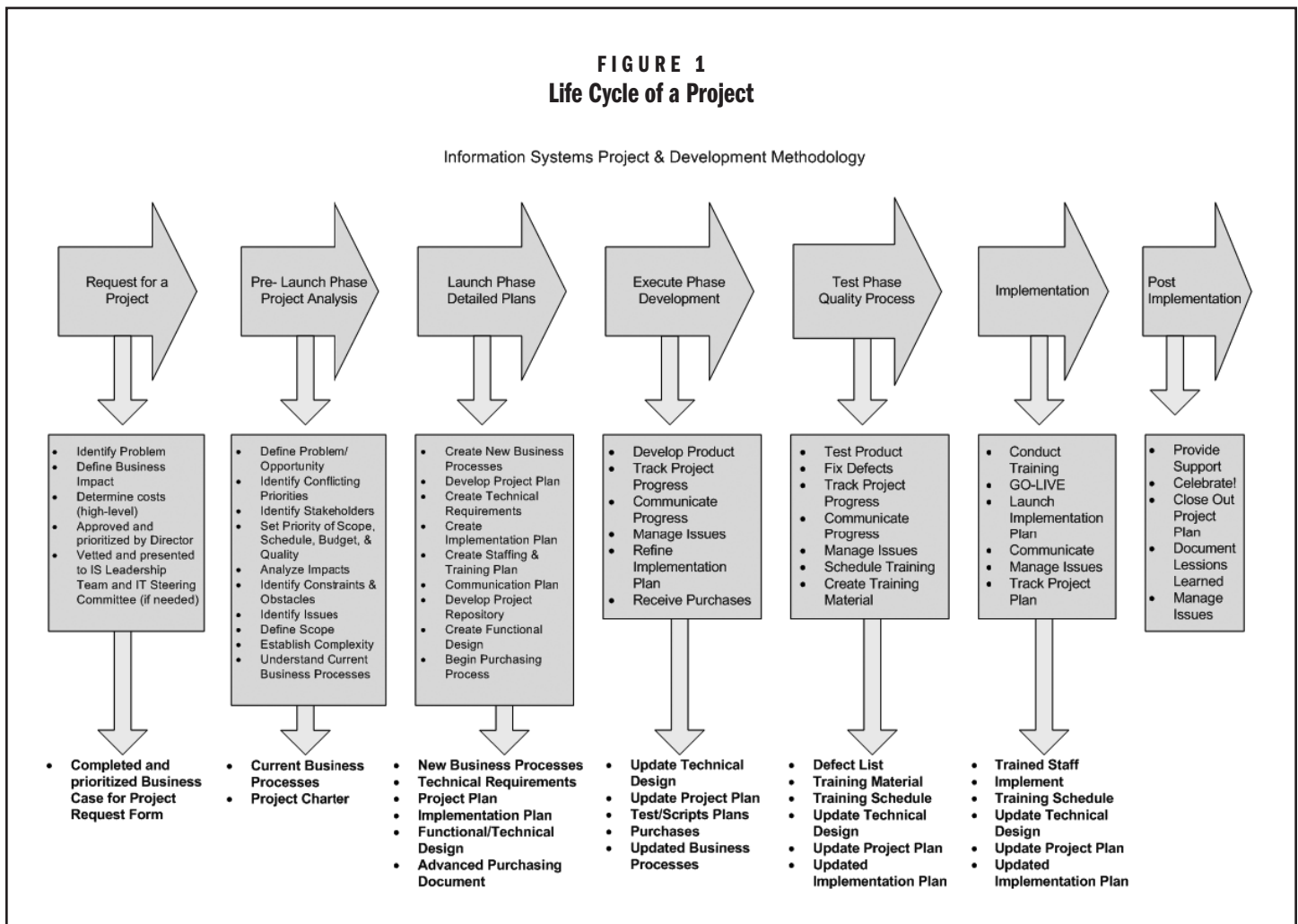
---

3. http://www.pmi.org/PMBOK-Guide-and-Standards.aspx

appointment reminder system for the Department of Eligibility and Benefits Services, a collaboration library for the Department of Family and Children's Services, and a server upgrade to accommodate new hardware for Adult Protective Services. The staff is well-respected and highly accountable to the process. This accountability is facilitated by the consistent use of standardized protocols and documents that are maintained in the Microsoft Project Server. For example, to request a project, a "Business Case Project Request" is completed that requires a problem description, background, business impact, measures of success, and cost/resource identification. Another notable document is the Project Charter used by the PMO in that it includes alternative recommendations, the scope of the work (what the project includes and what it excludes), critical success indicators and

metrics, and major project risks (description, cause, and plan).

After attending three project meetings, it was abundantly clear that the dual role of project manager and relationship manager is a vital one. Project management involves change in the organization to varying degrees. Sometimes the change is a welcome relief to a stagnant, inefficient system, and sometimes the change is mandated and difficult. The role of relationship manager aligns very closely with many change management theories in that the relationship manager can be viewed as the champion for change—a trusted team member who understands the nature of the business at hand. In one of the project meetings, a project team member expressed apparent frustration with a recommendation stating, "I've been doing this job for over 30 years and this is

FIGURE 1
Life Cycle of a Project

Information Systems Project & Development Methodology

the way it is done." The project/relationship manager skillfully and tactfully acknowledged the team member's experience while directing the discussion to the actual laws governing the issue, explaining that the recommendation also fits the criteria of compliance, paving the way for a successful resolution.

Obstacles were difficult to identify in this case study as the solutions to the problems of the organization are created in the PMO. One potential issue could be the fact that, due to the realities of human resource management, one unit may have more projects than the designated relationship manager has time to manage, necessitating the assignment of a different project manager. This was the case in one of the project management meetings observed, wherein the assigned project manager explained that he did not have the detailed business requirement knowledge that a relationship manager might have. Upon observing this meeting, it was apparent that the project manager was doing quite well with milestones being achieved and the work moving forward at the projected rate—a testimony to the skill of the manager and the well defined scope of work in the business case and resulting charter.

Implications For Contra Costa County

Four years ago, all EHSD mid-level and senior managers were trained in the principles of project management in a multi-day training event conducted by the University of California, Davis. Since then, the use of the project charter guides the work of project management and there is an excel spreadsheet used to create a portfolio of projects. The executive team, consisting of the bureau directors and the department director, functions as a project management steering committee. Based on this case study, the following recommendations are offered:

- Continue to mandate use of the project charter to guide work of the agency and enhance current form to incorporate features discussed in this case study.

- Maximize the use of Microsoft Project and, if feasible, implement Microsoft Project Server 2010. If not feasible to implement Microsoft Project Server 2010, then fully utilize the resource center on the intranet as a repository for sharing project work.

- Enhance the use of the executive team as the Project Management Steering Committee, since not all projects will be IT-based, as noted by Santa Clara's PMO.

- Make the distinction between projects that cross bureau lines and those that are simply applicable to a single bureau—think creatively to leverage funds.

- Implement relationship managers within bureaus and department-wide.

- Use the PMBOK® to guide our strategic initiatives work and other project management work.

- Encouraging the heart is inherent in these practices.

Acknowledgments