

The Value Equation: What's my worth on a program team and how do I keep it up?

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Introduction

As a planner, leader, or analyst, you know what skills you bring to the team. However, your project team may not fully understand what you do and what value you provide. You may find it difficult to explain something that is so intuitive to you. Whether you are just starting a career or are very experienced, how can you ensure the project team understands the value you add to the team? Also there are many others in the same field including the competitors who are providing similar service, what differentiates you from the rest of the planners and analysts? How can you add value to the service that gives you the upper edge?

This paper will take a look at the People, Process and Product as three key factors where planners, analysts and leaders can add value to their work product and project team. Using these three factors anyone can develop their own list of 'value-adds' that can help the customer and make one's career more successful.

Background

In today's cost competitive world, the value equation is becoming increasingly important. The global reach for sourcing the products and services means there are many more alternatives that cost less but provide on-par time and quality benefits. The automotive industry in particular is at production over-capacity by about 5 million vehicles, which puts tremendous cost pressures on all aspects of its business. This includes external sources like project planners who have to not just provide a required service that fills the gap but also make it available at a reduced cost or offer more for the same cost. For the general planner, analyst or leader, it translates into the need to be conscious of the value equation. The question to pose is, am I providing great value for the money and how can I make it attractive to the customer?

It would seem logical to ask "What's in it for me"? "What do I have to gain by adding value to my services?" "Would it mean I work more for the same money?" It is today's reality that more and more products and services (and their providers) are constantly examined for the value they provide to the customer or the end user. Although much of the recent examination is due to the short-term survival at stake, it will continue to exist for the long-term as the recent recession has taught us.

Take the airline industry for example. Southwest Airlines is the only profitable airline in the recent recession. Do you know why it is still profitable? The big reason is that the employees offer more service for the money by going above and beyond their job description to keep the planes flying in the air. For example, their pilots will not hesitate to help load the baggage so that the plane can get off the runway. By keeping planes flying Southwest makes more money per airplane than any other airline. Southwest also saves money by employing only the essential number of people required to run the operation. It does not have excess workforce that often is the first line of people to be laid off in tough times and in effect, by working beyond their job description, the employees are working toward long-term job security.

As a purchased service, we are constantly challenged to prove our value to a team, especially when the contracts are at renewal stage. We, as project planners, analysts and leaders, provide value in terms of focus, sense of urgency and we bridge the project management expertise gap. To put things in perspective for our profession, there are three fundamental factors which we must consider when thinking about adding value to our projects: **People, Process and Product**. We interact with people using processes to create products. All three factors working in balance creates a successfully completed project, increases chance for a successful product, and provides greater satisfaction for a job well done.

People

You will add more value to a team by dealing better with the people factor than with the other two factors. It is the immeasurable and intangible nature of interaction with people that can either add or diminish your value to the team. It is not what you think you are or what you project yourself to be, but it is what the team sees you as that determines your success. There are a myriad ways to add value but this paper will focus on three areas in particular where we can add value to our projects: Communication, Control, and Consistency.

Communication

Today's project teams have all kinds of technology available at their fingertips (emails, cell phones, databases, teleconferences, net meetings, etc) but the biggest problem is still communicating the right information at the right time when it is really needed. Reasons for miscommunication are plenty: The sheer size of the team makes it difficult to have face-to-face communication. Organizational layers make it difficult to know who is doing what and also gives rise to competing goals that cater to benefit one's organization versus benefiting the entire company. Ways in which we can provide value is by improving that communication by doing the following:

- 1. Connect the dots:** The majority of the failures that occur on any project can be attributed to miscommunication between various functional chimneys. It is very easy to add value to the team by connecting people from different chimneys. Most people, for various reasons (organizational, technical, or comfort level), do not like to cross their operating zone of what they are and what they can do.
 - Step up to the plate and be the liaison between the chimneys.
 - Integrate knowledge from different functions to create a big-picture first and put it in an easy-to-understand plan.
 - Raise the flag when you see a problem, do not wait for someone else to do it.
 - Use the "tension" between the delivering and receiving activities to ensure delivery or status updates when they are needed.
 - If you are working in Product Development, make sure you establish good connection with the manufacturing counterparts and vice versa.
 - Get Marketing, Finance and Purchasing into the loop as they typically are not aligned in terms of "time-based" deliverables and often are left out of knowing when something is due.

- 2. Alternative Representation of Data:** As project management practitioners, we use the work-planning tool to primarily improve communication and the timing of that communication. Although, developing a work plan is not enough. The work plan does not communicate everything that you intend to show (at least to those unaccustomed to it) and also, different organizations need different levels of abstraction and detail. You can either spend the time explaining what it means or use other illustrative methods (using Excel, PowerPoint) to explain the meaning. We all know one tool cannot solve every issue/problem, so we must use other tools and methods that can emphasize the point.

- First, create the big picture with an easy-to-understand plan.
- Develop simple illustrations/extractions of complex work plans either by using Summary/Roll-up/Grouping Features in MS Project or by using other software like Excel or PowerPoint.
- Indicate Open or Critical Issues on the illustration/extraction.
- A picture is worth thousand words but it may not convey the intent without the right words. Use the combination of graphic and text to provide the focus and sense of urgency.

Control

The most difficult aspect after communication is to control the teams and keep their focus on deliverables, as we have no direct control over them to get things done. A major contributor to loss of control is team discipline as well as personal discipline. There are ways to improve at the team level as well as the personal level that will help in restoring a decent control over team communication:

- 1. Issue Resolution:** As project planners, analysts and leaders, we experience the unending discussions on issues, which end up not answering the critical information of who is doing what and when to solve an issue. Most everyone else seems to know or pretends to know the magnitude of the issue, but very little progress is made as new issues/sub-issues pop up every week. Many times the issues become inter-organizational or personal so ask

questions with the end product's benefit in mind, as we are there to bring up the issue and help resolve it. There are five questions that will save time and headaches that will help in gaining control over issue that drag-on forever without resolution.

- What is the issue?
- What is the root cause?
- What are the solutions?
- What do you (the issue originator) recommend?
- When is the resolution needed or when will it be made by whom?

2. De-facto Power: As a purchased service, we have no direct control over any of the team members to get any work accomplished or tasks executed to the plan. So, we have to depend on the power of the client management, which requires us to establish an influence over the decision makers of the program. Sometimes appeal to a 'higher cause' like their division's performance objectives; company's objectives or image or leadership; safety or environmental leadership; etc. to get their buy-in on accomplishing tasks. Of course, you want to limit the use of such de-facto power to only when absolutely necessary. Work toward developing 'expert' power over the team members [Kerzner, 95] by demonstrating your expertise in the specialty area of project management.

3. Be-aware of Verbal Commitments: All databases and systems are questioned everyday for their accuracy by the same people who are responsible for using them correctly. So, beware of team members who verbally promise deliverables with 'don't worry, we will take care of it' and clearly contradict the information of their deliverables in the system. Ensure the verbal commitment is followed through and appropriate work plans, databases and systems are updated.

4. Handling the Slippages: On any given project, the only thing we can safely say with high degree of certainty is that slippages will occur from the moment a project plan is created. And yet not enough thought is given on how to handle the slippages. Therefore establish a clearly defined process to handle slippages and ensure the team agrees with the process. In dealing with slippages, remember that not every slippage is catastrophic to a plan and not every catastrophic slippage is reported and addressed in time.

- Develop a team-agreed slippage reporting process that always tries to resolve at the lowest possible level of management
- Clearly define the risks associated with the slippage and assign rating (GYR) as appropriate for the management to review and resolve
- Always try to clearly assess the reason(s) for the slippage and seek at least one work around with the team before reporting the slippage to the management
- Pay special attention to slippages that involve project funding, safety, or regulatory approvals as often these are out of control of the project team

On a personal level, consider the following actions to improve your sense of control over things that fall within your responsibility and also help project your professionalism to the project team:

5. Do Meeting Preparation: Make sure you spend at least 15 minutes prior to a meeting to prepare for it. If you are just participating, anticipate questions that are related to your area of control and be prepared to respond, if needed. Meeting preparation will help you to ask questions, suggest solutions, and seek resolutions.

6. Do Daily Recap: A five or ten minute recap on your own of the events of the day would help you focus. It could be simple mental notes, or jotted down highlights in a personal diary or even crossing out tasks/putting down new tasks in Outlook.

7. Organize your desk and your desktop: If it takes you more than 2 minutes to look for a recently used document then you need to organize. Team members would certainly think twice before asking for anything as it might take up too much time (lost productivity!) and they may not find what they are looking for. Avoid creating "Black Holes" where documents magically vanish, never to be found again!

Consistency

More than ever, one thing that is certain on any project is constant churning of the team personnel for various reasons (job rotations, promotions, demotions, reductions, resignations, etc.), which contribute to confusion, chaos,

uncertainty, loss of control and inconsistency. Remember that every person rotating out of a team leaves behind little or no information and every person rotating in brings in little or no information. Also expect a higher level of changes with the higher the level of the person coming in/going out. To minimize the unnecessary changes (out of lack of understanding) use every opportunity to let the incoming person know why and how you contribute to the team. On several occasions we, as a purchased service, remain on the program from beginning to the end and have the greatest amount of knowledge regarding the history of the program.

- Develop reporting cycles that the team and management agree to follow.
- Propose and develop common formats for various functional/sub-team reports that essentially have the same type of information but use different formats or software tools.
- Hold regular (weekly if appropriate) meetings with your customer/manager to discuss issues and review what is working and what is not working.
- Keep a history of changes, decisions, original plans, etc.

Process

Process development groups, especially in the Big 3, are constantly churning out new processes, sub-processes and major releases to existing processes. Process driven changes are typically associated with either lessons learned from immediate or past failures, or inadequate implementation of the existing processes. The sheer number and complexity of these processes provides us with opportunities to add value in three different ways: Interpretation, Integration and Implementation of the processes.

Interpretation

We can add value through interpretation of processes because: a) different sub-system and functional experts use different language and there needs to be a common language that everyone can understand; b) the processes are developed by one group of people to be used by a totally different group of people; and c) we need to act as a language translator on behalf of one function to explain what it means to a different function when we are connecting the dots between different functions. Use systems approach in interpretation by doing the following:

- Analyze the terminology (including criteria, constraints, deliverables, inputs required, etc).
- Relate it to the fundamental project objectives of Time, Cost, Quality, Risk, Functional, etc.
- Use trade-offs (if any) to understand what it means to the overall system or other function.
- Synthesize what it means to the overall system or other function
- Use alternative representation (using Excel or PowerPoint) to translate for the entire team or for specific functional group

Integration

The process driven product development with several gateways, milestones, and reviews has given rise to multiple processes that are either redundant or have a high degree of overlap. Simultaneously, many of these processes are not developed to provide a total process plan so, we provide the integration service of putting together a meaningful process that the team can use to plan and measure their progress against it.

- Understand the inter-relationships of the processes and functions using the processes.
- Establish connections (gives and gets) between processes/functions and identify people responsible for them.
- Identify gaps (clouds of magic) in the processes and suggest alternatives or solutions to close the gaps.
- Create a total system level integration, many times at a higher-level summary type process for ease of understanding.

Implementation

Development of a process is considerably easier than actually implementing it, which is evident from the number of processes that are constantly developed to enhance, replace or add to the existing processes.

1. Dealing with Process Templates: With almost every aspect of business is using some sort of template for their activities, it is very easy to fall into the trap of simply following the process templates. By definition, no two projects are alike, which means the templates must be reviewed with the project team and modified to fit the scope

of the project. Always use the process templates as starting guidelines and customize them using the following top-down approach:

- Start by reviewing with the key project personnel, the very top one or two level of details of a template to check their relevance to the scope of the project
- Remove WBS sections that do not apply and add new WBS sections if needed
- Replace generic titles with actual team members and develop their WBS sections to appropriate level of details
- If the work plan is too large or complex to manage, consider breaking it apart smaller sub-projects to provide better control over the planning and control process

Developing a team specific plan also helps in giving a sense of ownership of the plan to the team and they will also use and defend their plans better than a generic template.

2. Dealing with Probability: Do you know that the probability of any event happening on the exact time or day it is planned to occur is zero? That is because there is a 50/50 chance of the event occurring before or after the planned date [Anbari, 97]. So, if you see a plan that meets the deadline on the day it is due, probability of meeting the deadline is not very high. That is why the so called "Home Run" timing is in trouble from day one as, in many instances, it does not take into account the time lag between the go-ahead agreement and actual start of the very first task. More often than not the tasks have already begun or should have begun while the team is still planning. If you plan to be on time working backward from the deadline, most likely you will be late and if you plan to finish ahead of deadline, you will probably make it on time. Encourage the project teams to use proper amount of buffer time at the end of their task but discourage them from using it inside their tasks. As demonstrated well in his book on Critical Chain, the author Eliyahu Goldratt [Goldratt, 97] argues that the teams that inflate their activities to account for uncertainty often finish later than planned mainly because they rarely start on time.

3. Guarding against obsolescent plans: Too often, the work plans for a project do not relate to the reality of what the team members are truly working on. This is, in large part, due to the templates used by the Big 3. However, it is also due to lack of team understanding of the common reasons that cause projects to run into trouble:

- Changing project requirements
- Multiple projects creating shifting priorities
- Lack of communication
- Unqualified personnel
- Project funding availability
- Slow decision-making process
- Vague project scope
- Not enough resources
- Non-funded project phases
- Organizational Changes

So, whenever you come across workplans that do not represent the reality, use the above common reasons to establish the root cause. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to explain on how to deal with each of these common reasons for project delays. Use the list instead, to bring it to the right level of organization for review and make corrections to the plan. Also use it to establish with the team the methods to avoid future instances of disconnects and miscommunication.

Product

There is no getting around knowing more about the end product (which could be a process, software, or an artifact) than the project you support is responsible to deliver. If you understand the end product better, you will use the process better without blindly following a process template. You will also have a better perspective on what is critical (to raise a flag) and what is not critical (to not raise false alerts). It is important to talk to design and manufacturing engineers, or their managers and not be afraid to ask seemingly stupid questions. Many times, they will be happy to talk to you if you go in with the "Learning" vs. "Questioning" attitude. The more knowledge you have about the product/process, the more you will not find yourself saying 'but the business process says you need to do this' without realizing the relevance to the scope of change.

Simplification

In today's complex world of product/process development, use the commonly accepted life-cycle models to quickly get a grasp of the end product. Establish a pattern like Plan-Design-Build-Verify-Deliver to create a simple model of your own specific service you provide. For example, if you are supporting component development for build phases (prototype as well as production), use a simpler model like shown in Exhibit 1 to generate a plan, ask questions when changes are proposed or made, and even report on the status.

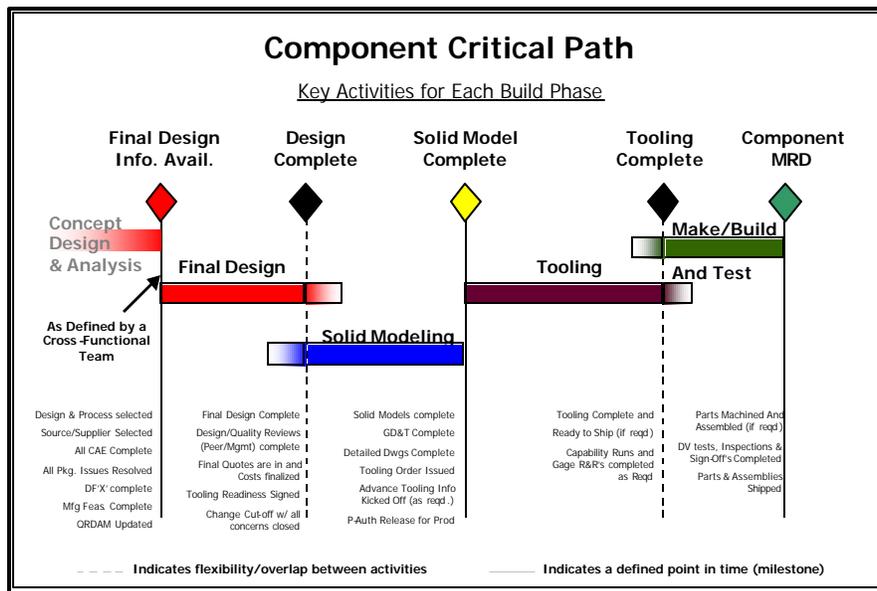


Exhibit 1. Sample Illustration of a Simplified Component Critical Path

You can also use these types of simplified models to note the key deliverables for successfully completing of one phase and kicking-off the next phase and eventually the completion of the entire life cycle.

Change Management

Among the tools used for change management, using Cause and Effect diagrams is very effective in identifying the scope of changes in a 'what-if' scenario. It is important to know the scope of 'what' is changing before developing solutions on how to manage the change. However, the product design and manufacturing changes pose the greatest challenge in controlling the project plans, especially when they are handed down to you as "what do-we-do now" rather than "what-if". In "what do-we-do now" mode, the team is in a mad-scramble to react to the change and will likely not include all the functional, cost, quality, risk, and time issues. Cause and Effect diagrams in reverse (Reverse Ishikawa) can be used to document the chain of changes that the desired end effect causes and what needs to be done with a change that has been handed down.

Systems Thinking

Use Systems Thinking to identify issues and elevate risks to the program as appropriate. Systems Thinking is to understand what makes up the overall system and how the individual parts or subsystems interact with each other. Even in the age of simultaneous engineering/ development, etc., there are still gaping holes to be found when a problem arises and the team members are poles apart in their understanding and communication of the true nature of the problem and the risks associated with it. In most cases, the originator is extremely confident that the problem is very manageable (i.e., doesn't want you to 'micro-manage') whereas the rest of the team is not so sure and quite often they are right. Use systems perspective to analyze the impact of lowest level changes on the overall system (and vice versa) to provide compelling reasons for or against the changes and associated risks.

Conclusion

The three fundamental factors of People, Processes and Product that we interact with daily on our projects provide us plenty of opportunities to add value. Think about Communication, Control and Consistency as opportunities to provide focus when dealing with the People factor. With the Process factor, think about Interpretation, Integration and Implementation as opportunities to provide sense of urgency on process deliverables. Lastly with the Product factor, think about Simplification, Change Management and Systems Thinking as opportunities to improve the product delivery.

This paper has highlighted only a few of the many ways in which we can look at the value equation to provide value for the money to our customers. As the saying goes 'if we keep doing what we did, we keep getting what we got' so, in order to achieve better results today than yesterday, we have to look for ways to do things differently to add value. We must seek new ways to keep the project teams focused on the project, with a sense of urgency on deliverables and managing projects better. I know I have learned a lot since I took on the task of writing of this paper and much of the learning is not about finding something new but re-defining and using what is already known. I am sure each one of us has a list of things that we can offer as 'value-add' that takes us beyond our job description.

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