



Reducing the Risk of Mission-Critical Projects

Using Tie Points for Project Success

by Bob Cliff

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The fact that major projects are highly risky is well documented. Since 1995, the Standish Group's annual project success survey has consistently found that approximately 70 percent of IT projects either fail or are "challenged," meaning that they were completed but were over budget, late, and/or delivered less than initially promised.

Unfortunately these projects are often mission-critical for businesses in today's competitive environment. So how can you ensure your project is one of the 30 percent that succeeds? To start, be mindful of the myths:

Myth 1: To gain control of a project, keep drilling down for details.

Though detailed planning is critical to a successful project, troubled projects are often buried in detailed status reports and issues lists. They need a clear picture of overall status against the key accomplishments required for successful project completion.

Myth 2: Business units as diverse as operations and IT cannot work together successfully.

Each subproject of a major project is often a large and complex project in its own right, with its own culture, style, and set of internal objectives. It is often challenging to coordinate these efforts. This is where experienced project leaders play a key role. If the project leaders are appropriately focused on the critical deliverables for the overall program, they can manage the details for their own teams and drive toward successful collaboration across teams where needed.

Myth 3: Organizations need to follow a prescribed project management process and use a sophisticated tool.

Project management disciplines are necessary for project success, but tools and processes alone do not address the leadership functions that are required. Trying to bend every group involved in a large project to a single project planning process or tool is often fruitless, costly, and filled with frustration.

Mythbusters = Tie Points

Our experience shows that very large projects run most successfully when they stay focused on the key junctures and accomplishments required to successfully complete the project. We call these key points of interaction and coordination "Tie Points." Using tie points, progress and remaining work can be tracked in a contextualized, big picture view of the entire project. This is similar to tracking a construction project by key activity (foundation, framing, electrical) rather than trying to "see" or manage the progress of the building project by looking at the individual accomplishments of the subcontractors involved.

Tie points are not just a collection of milestones selected from each group's individual plan. Rather, they are carefully selected points of significant convergence throughout the overall



project's lifecycle. They become the vital glue that links disparate groups and their plans together and keeps them moving toward successful outcomes. They also form the basis for project dashboard analytics needed by senior management to identify and respond to risks before they become unmanageable.

Managing a mission-critical project using tie points can't solve all challenges, but our experience has shown that this approach goes a long way to reducing unnecessary data collection and reporting, and keeping teams collaborating successfully. Tie points enable leaders and their teams to speak the same language and drive toward successful results.

Sidebar:

Major HMO Uses Tie Points to Put Medical Records System in Order

For a major healthcare provider, the successful implementation of a comprehensive electronic medical records system was of great strategic importance. The project was made more complex because there were multiple delivery centers—each needing its own version of the system. To keep on top of this complex project, a program office was formed to provide oversight and status for the senior management team.

The healthcare provider tried using an automated project management tool, requiring the multiple IT and business units to conform to a detailed planning template and standard. Not surprisingly, this project reporting approach began drowning in detailed data of dubious accuracy. No one could tell where the project actually stood.

By focusing all activities around critical tie points of the project, we significantly reduced the time spent collecting and reporting on project details and dramatically improved visibility into the project's real status and key risks. Business units and IT teams could then manage their own portions of the project, but also connect to other subprojects at critical points along the project's life cycle. By looking at the intersections between project teams and the end goals, senior managers could truly govern the implementation of the electronic medical records system, leaving the details to the project leads accountable for their part of the work.

Summarized planning and dashboard reports were used by senior managers to plan, coordinate, and speed progress toward meeting the tie point goals. These reports served as critical tools for each phase of implementation and finally, project completion.

About Cliff Consulting

Founded in 1972 by Bob Cliff, Cliff Consulting, Inc. is a San Francisco Bay Area based management consulting firm that specializes in helping clients plan and lead critical projects such as business process improvements, compliance initiatives, mergers and integrations, and technology implementations. The firm is comprised of exceptionally senior consultants who offer years of experience helping to lead, build and motivate internal teams while tailoring their approach to fit the culture and needs of its clients. Contact Bob through www.cliffconsulting.net.