

Abstract

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Biography

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Project Management Offices (PMO) - Masters or Servants?

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Many organisations implement Project Management or Project Support Offices (PMO/PSO) as part of their journey towards improved project management maturity. However, all too often, implementation or subsequent operational activities begin to cause conflicts between the PMO and the wider project management community. This article looks at the reasons why this rift may occur, and how best to avoid creating the environment in which such conflict will arise. (Throughout the commentary we can assume that PMO and PSO are synonymous, and that the term projects can be interpreted as referring to projects, programmes or portfolios of projects.)

Most project management professionals would agree that a well organised and controlled PMO is a benefit to the organisation. Whilst the range of services offered to the PM community will depend on the size and maturity of the organisation, and the complexity of its programmes and projects, most PMOs will provide governance, processes, training and support. In return, there are certain expectations placed on the PM community, namely provision of project data, participation in reviews, mentoring and coaching of junior project managers, and feedback on process effectiveness and best practice. A key role of the PMO is often to act as a buffer between projects and the senior management, especially regarding the consistent reporting of project status.

For most project managers, this give and take should seem like good value. Good project managers will already recognise the importance of project metrics and will be using the data explicitly to help them manage their projects. Similarly the provision of consistent processes and templates are usually seen as beneficial, enabling the PM to focus on the practical project management activities they signed up to perform. Even better if someone is prepared to take the project data and generate reports for senior management.

But experience has repeatedly shown that without due diligence this state of symbiosis can become imbalanced and the PMO starts to feed off the project management community becoming a parasitic organism. In the next section we'll look at how this behaviour manifests itself, before looking at some potential root causes and how to prevent them from becoming issues.

Emerging Signs of Dysfunction

Demands for data

The most common sign of the PMO turning into a parasite is an ever increasing demand for data. Information has a natural tendency to generate a demand signal for further information. A parasitic PMO will often begin to ask project managers for more and more metrics. Usually these demands are made without explanation; a memo or email is sent out to project managers as an edict with a deadline for compliance. To a busy project manager, often under siege from one or more stakeholders, this will seem unnecessary and unreasonable. To them, project work is revenue generating and must therefore take priority over any internal organisational demands.

Standards Enforcement

Another manifestation of the parasitic PMO is the introduction of what project managers may view as arbitrary standards. These are often linked with the introduction of new project management tools. Examples may be that project tasks recorded in a project scheduling tool may not exceed 10 days, or that anonymous resources are not permitted in the tool. Whilst there may be valid reasons for the mandate of such standards, there may be equally valid reasons why the project manager elects to use these elements.

Sadly, standards like the two mentioned are often only invoked to make the project management tool easier to use when it comes to consolidating project data across the enterprise. In other words the project manager needs to change their behaviour to meet the requirements of the tool, rather than the tool being an aid to the management of the project. In this instance it is probably not unreasonable for the project management community to question the validity of the decision.

Intransigent Process Compliance

The PMO is often the owner of the organisational project management processes. This has the potential to generate another source of dysfunctional behaviour. Good and effective processes need to be flexible and tailorable to the specific requirements of a project, and to a certain extent to the experience of the project manager. Most modern reference models and standards include this requirement for tailoring of the organisational process to the project needs.

Problems arise when the PMO becomes a rigid enforcer of “The Process” rather than supporting the principles behind the process. Tailoring is best done at the beginning of the project, but there should be sufficient contingency for additional tailoring to take place further downstream. Good project managers generally know when it is acceptable to take short cuts, and a dialogue with the process owner or expert, along with a brief entry in the project log, should be sufficient to minimise any potential risk.

Potential Root Causes

Managerial Mistrust

A catalyst for the dysfunctional behaviour of a PMO is often the conduct of senior management. A frequently observed corollary of the Peter Principle (where individuals are promoted to a managerial level appropriate to their level of incompetence) is that a promotion into a senior management position involves some kind of brain drain in which all previously learned lessons and good practices are sucked out. The very first thing to go is the concept of “treating others as you would wish to be treated yourself”.

A dysfunctional PMO allows managerial mistrust to grow and fester within an organisation, because the PMO becomes the agent of suspicion. The project manager provides status information to the senior management through the PMO. Cold data, taken out of context, will inevitably be interpreted in different ways as it moves through the chain of command. A project manager’s subjective comments maybe be summarised, paraphrased or even removed through the PMO reporting mechanism opening up the likelihood that senior managers perception of a project will be irrevocably prejudiced, putting the PM under additional pressure to fix a problem that may not actually exist.

Balance of Power

As the buffer zone between the project and the senior management, and often as a self-appointed stakeholder, the PMO effectively holds the balance of power over the project manager. Their mandate comes from the senior leadership, and because they are unaccountable in terms of project delivery, the goals and objectives of the PMO take priority over the project. This will invariably lead to a war of attrition between PMO and projects culminating in two equally dysfunctional outcomes. The most prevalent is that the project manager capitulates and provides “concocted” data in an effort to get the PMO off their backs. This has the potential knock-on effect that erroneous data is used to drive unnecessary process improvements

which will push the organisation into a vicious cycle. A more severe consequence is that good, experienced project managers will simply leave to ply their trade in more appealing environments.

Wannabe Project Managers

When implementing a PMO an organisation is often faced with a dilemma. In an ideal world, the PMO implementation lead should be an individual with project management skills and experience, an understanding of process management and improvement, and good change management experience. The problem is that these are the people that you need to be managing your most critical projects.

Because the PMO is sometimes seen as a tactical tool, the temptation is often to use more junior staff to run the implementation - perhaps a business analyst or quality specialist who has good project management process and business knowledge but no actual experience of running projects other than having been a member of a project team in the past.

Preventing and Stopping the Rot

Define the Boundaries

As part of the implementation it is critical that the specific scope, goals and objectives of the PMO are defined, communicated and agreed by both senior management and the PM community. Just as any project should have a clear statement of requirements and expected outcomes, so this is true for the PMO implementation and subsequent operation. A useful practice is to create a PMO charter which is visible across the organisation. It is also important to remember that the project management community is an active stakeholder in the PMO, whilst the PMO is not a direct stakeholder in projects. Projects must not be coerced into performing tasks which do not actively benefit the real stakeholders, especially once a project is in progress.

Get the Right People

Part of the PMO scope must include definitions of roles and responsibilities, and it is incumbent on the sponsors and implementation team to ensure that the right people are assigned to these roles, along with the appropriate responsibility and accountability. The reality is that experienced project managers will generally make the best PMO leaders. Aspiring PMs would do well to spend time in the PMO to help better understand their chosen disciplines, but under no circumstances should they be solely responsible for setting the standards by which the project management community is expected to operate.

Management of Change

Despite living in an internet enlightened information age we still seem to find it difficult to learn from past mistakes. Most dysfunctional behaviour can be traced back to a basic lack of management of change, not just in the PMO but across the enterprise.

In the case of the PMO, both demands for data and implementation of new standards and processes can be successfully handled through simple dialogue between interested parties, and a little bit of common sense. This include regulatory requirements as well as internal organisational requirements. By assessing the impact of the change on the project management community before mandating change, and working with project managers to consider how best to implement such changes most issues can be eliminated before they have a chance to escalate into open dissent.

Take a Reality Check

The question of “who audits the auditors” is often raised regarding quality teams, but similar consideration should also be given to the PMO. If the PMO is seen to be transparent and adhering to its own policies, processes and procedures, the project management community is more likely to respect, comply and collaborate with the PMO.

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These four rules are relatively simple to adopt and if put into place at the inauguration of the PMO, and followed up at suitable opportunities during the operation will go a long way to ensuring true synergy between the PMO, the project management community and the senior management. There are enough battles to be fought in a project environment without creating unnecessary internal struggles which ultimately serve no-one but cause undue fallout and resentment. Ultimately, the PMO is a service organisation, and the question of master or servant should never arise. If it does, then it's almost certainly time to review the operation and implement any necessary changes before things get completely out of hand.