Every Organisation Needs Project Management Capability

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Introduction

This year alone, pandemics, wars, labour and material shortages, 'techceleration' (Prieto, 2019) and climate change have disrupted businesses across the globe. These challenges highlight that businesses must be ready to deal with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) at any moment . (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; USAHEC, 2018).

Working in VUCA environments can destabilise operating procedures, throw long-term plans into disarray, and paralyse traditional decision-making processes (Mack et., 2015) . Unfortunately, far from being out of the ordinary, VUCA based disruptions have become so commonplace that "…*in order to have a competitive advantage, strategy executives need to treat almost every day as a potentially highly disruptive scenario*…" Santill, n.d.

To maintain a competitive advantage in uncertain times, managers need new skills, frameworks and processes for managing unique challenges (Prahalad, 2009). This is why all businesses need project management capability.

Why organisations need project management capability

Project management is a results-oriented management style (Larsen, 2020). Project management provides a framework, systems, tools and processes for managing unique and temporary challenges (PMI, 2021). Unlike the skills required for operational management, project management skills focus on successfully delivering non-routine and non-repetitive work (Larsen, 2020) – the sort of work one might encounter in a VUCA environment.

There is a range of different project management methodologies available (i.e. PMBoK, Agile, PRINCE2), and each provides a novel way to manage unique, time-constraint, work (McCormick, 2012; Wideman, 2002) Notwithstanding the arguments put forward by proponents of each school of thought as to why their chosen methodology is best, there is agreement on at least one point. All projects have a specific Life-Cycle,

and the Project Life-Cycle consists of four stages: Defining, Planning, Executing, and Closing (Larsen, 2020). Knowing what to do in each of these phases will assist managers to navigate the VUCA challenges.

Defining: "…*If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem…*" (Albert Einstein). Taking the time to truly understand and define the challenge (project) that needs to be undertaken is a foundational tenet of project management. In the *Defining Stage* project managers work to clarify the actual issue they are dealing with (articulation), what they are trying to accomplish (goals), what tasks need to be done to complete the work (work decomposition) and who is responsible for completing each task.

Planning: "…*By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail*…" (Benjamin Franklin). After defining exactly what they are attempting to do, project managers begin to plan how it can be done. In this stage of the project life-cycle, the project manager must give serious thought and effort to understanding what each element of the plan requires to be successful. It is in this stage that budgets are calculated, schedules are estimated and resources (plant, equipment and people) are assigned to each of the task elements ((Larsen, 2020).

Executing: "…*No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with main enemy forces…*" (von Moltke et al., 1900). As every project manager knows, despite your best planning efforts, projects have a nasty habit of not progressing the way you wanted them to. Executing projects demands a high level of reporting, monitoring, controlling and corrective actions (Usher & Whitty, 2017). Project managers need to ensure they are monitoring and controlling the key indicators of project health. Are we on time? Are we on budget? Will we achieve everything we set out to do?

Closing: "…*Pass on what you have learned*…" (Master Yoda). Projects are temporary. They are supposed to come to an end. Some of the activities of the Closing Stage are self-evident. Redeploying the team, releasing the materials and equipment, and reconciling the cost plan. However, the most important aspect of the Closing Stage is often the one most often overlooked. Although each project is unique, this does not mean that lessons cannot be transferred and new knowledge generated. At the end of each project, project managers should assess the outcomes of their projects against previously agreed success criteria and review the performance of themselves, their teams, and the project. What is learned through these project debriefs needs to be captured, documented, disseminated and stored for later reference (Jugdev, 2012).

Conclusion

Whether we want to admit it or not, VUCA is becoming the new normal for many businesses. Navigating the challenges presented by VUCA requires a different set of management skills than those required to manage routine operations. Project Management is a results-oriented management style (Larsen, 2020) that is well suited to VUCA environments (Reeson, 2019). Adopting project management frameworks, systems and processes as a core capability of any organisation will give it a strategic advantage in this brave, new, VUCA world.

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