Effective Progress Reporting – by Simon Kennish

Progress reporting, one of the areas that strikes fear into the heart of many a project manager and quite a few Project Directors and Programme Directors.

Some people consider reporting progress on their project or programme as either a weapon to be beaten with later, or a way of hiding the real progress (or lack of it) in a 30 page document that they hope no one will ever read – then when it goes wrong later than can whip it out and say 'ah, but we told you it was going wrong months ago, just look at the progress report on x date'. Shocking I know, but sadly all too common. That is where the best project and programme managers outshine their weaker fellows, and in so doing make the Project Director or Programme Director look great in the eyes of their superiors.

So how do we ensure that we have truly effective progress reporting?

For me it is very simple, if you keep the basics in mind – what is the purpose of the report? Surely it's to keep those that need to know about progress informed of the real position, and to be honest if it is lacking in any area. If lacking of course, it needs a plan to resolve the situation and recover the shortfall. Are we on track or off track with regard to the key parameters of the project or programme. Again sadly, even these get forgotten about, far too often I see reports that concentrate on time and cost only – yes these are important, but what about the other four key areas??? For those new to the area, the full set should be time, cost, quality, risk, benefit and scope. This builds upon the classic Barnes Triangle and helps cover the other three aspects of the project or programme. You should be reporting against these parameters – the Golden Six, by each project and at programme level.

I have delivered a major programme comprising 5 large projects over several years, and reported progress every month to the Programme Director, Chief Executive and Member Committee using a 3 page report, backed with a single page A3 Gantt chart. That is all you need at this programme level. At the project level beneath, there was a 3 page report and a similar A3 Gantt chart for each project. All simple to read and understand – the true skill of a high quality programme or project manager.

My thinking behind this was that it was more of an Executive Summary document than a fully detailed project and programme document. My audience would not be interested in 30+ pages of detail, they just wanted to know if it was on track or not, if not what where we going to do to recover the position. Once you cross that simplicity threshold the rest becomes easy. Well not exactly easy, as I have spent several occasions in heated debate with project and programme teams debating how we recover a 'red traffic light' on the draft report. Great – that is what the team should be focusing on, the best solution. Then, when the report goes in and shows a 'red' or 'amber' light there is a note of what caused it and how it is going to be resolved. That is the best type of reporting possible, open, honest and truthful. It builds credibility for you and the Project or Programme Directors involved.

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I would rather spend the time on the solution before the report goes in, than spend twice as long in an inquisition later on why the report was misleading – and still have to spend the same time on the solution – only by this point team morale will have plummeted and whatever the solution looks like then, you can bet that your superiors will crawl through the detail at that point as they have just lost confidence and trust in the delivery team – thats a hard place to be for everyone involved.

So in summary, if you feel the need to issue a 30+ page periodic progress report, to hide bad news, then you should be thinking about your next job – otherwise when the truth finally comes out, and it inevitably will, you will probably be looking for your next job and not through choice.

Bio Notes - Simon Kennish FRICS, MAPM, MCMI is a Chartered Surveyor, Project and Programme Manager with a passion for delivering major projects and programmes in both the public and private sectors. www.simonkennish.com