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The initial failed launch of CMS's HealthCare.gov website is cautionary tale of what can go wrong when leadership teams do not have actionable intelligence delivered from a problem solver's perspective. Plagued by glitches and performance issues, HealthCare.gov was so unreliable during its debut in October 2013 that the government considered scrapping the entire \$300 million contractor-led project and starting over from scratch. The small team of Silicon Valley technologists and engineers famously brought in to troubleshoot and fix the website observed a peculiar lack of urgency from leadership teams. They would eventually identify one of the root causes: an absence of reliable dashboard reporting, thus making it difficult for leaders to measure and call out what was going wrong. One of the engineers remedied that problem by getting a dashboard in place as a tool to facilitate their newly created daily stand up meetings. That factor along with the many sleepless nights of re-coding eventually led to a successful relaunch<sup>1</sup>. While this case may be extreme, it illustrates the importance of setting up leaders to make the best possible decisions, sometimes within rapidly evolving situations where perfect information will never exist.



Healthcare transformation can be difficult to manage without a clear understanding of the current state of the work. An organization's project management office (PMO) can ensure that project managers are leading these efforts as true change agents and not just reporting on them. Healthcare organizations without fully functional PMOs may have opportunities to hire one or two project managers to help tackle high priority efforts in the short-term. This article will highlight the importance of hiring and training the right kind of project manager from the start in order to build up a PMO with value-added problem solvers. In addition, we will provide an example of how a problem solving resource can augment a common project management responsibility like executive status reporting.

<sup>1</sup> Brill, Steven "Code Red." TIME March 10, 2014: TIME.com Web. 1 March 2014.

## Hiring the right people

One of the challenges to managing complex health care transformation projects is finding the right resources to help a PMO deliver value for its customers (i.e., business units). PMOs with project managers that act like administrators erode efforts to earn credibility and gain acceptance for the PMO's long-term direction<sup>2</sup>. Think back on a bad experience you had with a PMO and chances are its project managers were more concerned with managing the minutia instead of truly driving change. More specifically, project managers may act as passive task trackers instead of active problem solvers when it comes to helping leadership teams and their business units execute on strategic goals. Here are some differences in traits exhibited by "task tracker" vs. "problem solver" project managers:

Task Trackers	Problem Solvers
1. Interested in project management methodologies as absolute solutions and lacks curiosity to learn the business of the organization beyond PM duties.	1. Well-versed in project management, but also seeks to understand the nature of the business and what constitutes success in the bigger picture. Seeks to understand the organization's strategic goals.
2. Incentivized to focus on compliance; not empowered by leadership to drive change.	2. Involves everyone affected by change projects early on, to gain their support, overcome their natural threat response and generate a culture of engagement. <sup>3</sup>
3. Uncomfortable pushing back on leadership teams when there is lack of clarity on how activities tie back to strategic goals.	3. Possesses strong written and verbal communications skills to identify and align critical path milestones with strategic goals.
4. Focuses on maintaining the project schedule as the deliverable. Exhibits a "not my problem" mentality with business units as long as the project schedule is up-to-date.	4. Understands that the project schedule is an important tool, but shares ownership with business units on project outcomes as the true deliverable.
5. Becomes the "process police" over time.	5. Strives towards customer service and servant leadership.

Organizations that seek to build the right kind of PMO should work closely with their executive leadership teams and human resources department to attract and hire problem solvers and not just the run-of-the-mill certified project manager. Former management consultants are good resource pools to tap into given their training often focuses on generalist analytical and problem solving skillsets. Moreover, they typically possess the communication "soft skills" required to manage and serve a variety of stakeholders from the C-suite down to the tactical level.

## The Problem Solver's Approach to Executive Status Reporting

In a previous article ([Lessons for Launching a Project Management Office \(PMO\) To Support DSRIP Implementation](#)), we talked about the importance of obtaining commitment from executive leadership teams in order to launch PMOs successfully. Buy-in can deteriorate quickly if leaders can't obtain reliable, data-driven information from their teams to monitor project progress, understand pain points within the organization and quickly execute decisions to break down barriers towards achieving results that support the overall business strategy. One of the key roles of any successful PMO is to provide that information through weekly executive status reporting in order to drive the decision-making process. It is important to note that reporting activities should occur weekly in lieu of a biweekly or monthly cadence in order to surface risks and issues as early and often as possible. Project managers adept

<sup>2</sup> Schoen, Mebula. "Seven Best Practices for a Highly Effective PMO". Gartner. 10 March 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan, Stewart & Lars Mieritz, "Free Your PMO to Be the Accelerator for Change, Not the Brake". Gartner. 8 October 2013

at problem solving will often connect with their customers daily in an unobtrusive manner (once again highlighting the importance of having strong communication skills) in order to gauge the health of an activity, workstream or project.

While there is no universal executive status report and dashboard that fits every organization, we have found that reporting against critical path milestones that have been pre-identified, analyzed and agreed upon with the project's executive leadership is a good start. The traditional definition of critical path indicates activities that must start and finish on their designated dates, or else there are negative impacts to the end date of the entire project.<sup>4</sup> As we emphasized, project managers who act as problem solvers versus task trackers work iteratively with executive leaders come up with the "right" critical path details that are simple, transparent and common sense for monitoring projects. PMOs must make a cultural shift from "the more detailed information the better" to providing just enough of the right data to leadership about ongoing initiatives.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is important to know your audience and understand that executives get the most value from status reporting when they have a quick and easy reference to make decisions on a minimum weekly basis. What determines "quick and easy" will differ depending on the person. Since no one leader is alike, it is important for project managers and their executive leadership teams to set content expectations for reporting during pre-planning or planning stages. This process requires a high degree of flexibility and adaptability on both sides. Project managers should have a broad range of soft skills competencies such as communication, conflict resolution, persuasion and facilitation.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, most effective status reports center around critical path milestones, which are often presented in a dashboard view where colored indicators representing whether progress is on track (green), at risk (yellow) or has major issues (red). There are also sections to call out risks and issues (along with proposed mitigation steps or solutions) and support information on activities through the next week. It is also important to note that the objective of status reporting is not to achieve "green" statuses week over week. Creating a PMO environment where lots of green equates to success leads to a culture where project managers will do anything possible to keep from turning an indicator yellow or red, and avoid calling out risks and issues to force a tough conversation.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of executive status reporting is to facilitate a continual process for leaders to prioritize resources for new projects and make decisions around troubled projects such as allocating additional resources, pushing out launches or killing projects off entirely.

Executive status reporting is just one facet of building the right kind of PMO to help an organization get things done along the way to meeting strategic goals. The foundation for ensuring that these components are value-added will ultimately depend on the people who manage and execute those processes and tools, often in ambiguous and political environments. The strongest PMO foundations will contain a cadre of problem solvers who are willing to hold leadership teams accountable and are capable to help them succeed.

## **Bridging the Gap**

As we have worked with our clients to develop their PMO capabilities, we have seen them benefit from these practices. We know that there is often confusion in the beginning of project implementation, and we help our clients ease the transition by guiding them through the process of identifying and prioritizing their project management requirements, staffing and training their PMO teams, and standardizing and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/moving-work-breakdown-structure-critical-path-6978>

<sup>5</sup> Schoen, Mebula. "Seven Best Practices for a Highly Effective PMO". Gartner. 10 March 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Schoen, Mebula. "Seven Best Practices for a Highly Effective PMO". Gartner. 10 March 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Apfel, Audrey L. "Best Practices for Project and PMO Reporting: Creating Effective Executive Dashboards". Gartner. 21 December 2011.

promoting a shared toolset. COPE Health Solutions can assist your organization to assess your current project management capability, and develop a clear vision and operational plan to implement your project management office. Through our partnership, we will build a PMO that is both integrated with your organizational strategy and will drive the management of your project portfolio.

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