Dealing with Uncertainty: Seven Project Management Lessons From Sports Coaches

By Jerry Manas, PMP

The only thing certain about projects is that they are uncertain. Since a project is unique by definition, this is an indelible truth. Despite the best laid plans, there will undoubtedly be variables that will require deviation from those plans.

Once we accept this truth, the trick, then, is to learn how to manage that uncertainty—which, paradoxically, is best done by embracing it. We can begin with a revised definition of project management—something so simple that anyone can understand:

> *"Project management is the art of leading people to achieve objectives in the face of uncertainty."*

Notice that we use the work *art* instead of *science*. There are no hard and fast rules that can be used when dealing with uncertainty. But, like any art, there are principles we can adopt and experts we can learn from.

Sports coaches make an excellent example as they deal with uncertainty in every play of every game. With that in mind, let's look at seven key characteristics of sports coaches that project managers can learn from.

1) They Acknowledge Uncertainty

To begin with, a coach starts with the mindset that uncertainty is a given. There's uncertainty about the opposing team, the weather, team injuries, how the other team will respond to each play, and a host of other elements. A coach knows that, despite the best laid plans, these elements are at play. A good coach will expect that changes to the plan will be made based on unfolding events, either in between plays or in between periods.

As project managers, we need to apply this mentality to our projects as well. Certainly we must analyze risks, but we must also reserve the right to alter the plan when needed, and even set stage gates where a decision is made whether to stay on course or not. In essence, if we go into a project acknowledging that there will be uncertainty and *planning* for uncertainty, we'll be better prepared to deal with it when it comes.

2) They Do Plenty of Research

Although uncertainty is a given, that does not mean that coaches decide to "wing it" when they approach games. On the contrary, they do extensive research prior to games, viewing game films with the team—from their own prior games and from the opposing team's games. They look for what went right, as well as what went wrong and may need correction. They look for nuances in how the other team responded to various situations, and how their own players executed. They use all this information to determine what to practice, which items to tidy up, and how they should approach the other team.

We, too, must analyze lessons learned from past projects, in order to repeat what worked and avoid what didn't. Likewise, while we may not have an opposing team (although it can seem like it at times when we throw organizational politics into the mix), we do need to profile our stakeholders. This includes determining which players are impacted the most, who has the most influence, and how we should communicate to each stakeholder group.

3) They Prepare a Game Plan and Objectives

With the proper research done, coaches then use the information at their disposal to form a strategy for the game, design plays, and set specific objectives for their players. And if the objectives aren't met, or the team doesn't execute effectively—even despite making adjustments to the plan along the way—they analyze the reasons why before the next game.

Setting objectives and strategies is important for our projects as well. Not only should we consider functional objectives, we should think about performance objectives as well (in terms of testing, product performance, team performance, etc.). And we should set strategies for how to approach the project in terms of level of functionality, scheduling method, team structure, and other criteria. Not every project is the same, so a "one size fits all" approach is not recommended.

4) They Execute Incrementally

While sports coaches set strategies and objectives, and even prepare specific plays, they do not outline the entire game in terms of sequential individual plays. It would be ludicrous to do so. That's because any given play will depend on how the flow of the game goes, and what is happening at the time. The plays become more of a toolbox to choose from. Even from a high-level planning perspective, the coach will adjust the strategy and objectives as needed to insure that the game is won. They approach each period or quarter in piecemeal fashion, often in fixed-time iterations (i.e. a hockey game has three twenty-minute periods, etc.).

With projects, we must also execute and course-correct incrementally, using rolling wave or iterative scheduling approaches to account for that which cannot be

predicted with accuracy early on. And by operating in fixed-time iterations, with stage gates to assess where things stand, we gain a more pragmatic way of managing scope (provided there is either a preset number of iterations or there is some way to identify when "the game is over").

There are lesson from the "playbook" approach as well. Much like a coach prepares plays that can be called upon when needed, we can build checklists of activities that we can use in our toolbox. These checklists would not typically be part of the project plan, but could be used as components of *work packages* (i.e. the lowest deliverable level or lowest level of the work breakdown structure). The people who are closest to the action can manage the details, using the checklists where appropriate.

5) They Put the Right People in the Right Roles

We cannot eliminate uncertainty. But we can minimize its impact if we have the right people in the right roles. It would seem to go without saying, but coaches make a point of putting the right people in the right roles—and keeping them there. If a player excels at a certain role, they remain in that role and as they improve, they escalate to higher levels of pay and prestige within that role. Certainly a coach might experiment to find hidden strengths, but the player does not, for instance, excel to a point where they are promoted to the level of coach.

As management experts from Tom Peters to Marcus Buckingham have pointed out, for some reason we have not learned this lesson in business. We consistently promote people out of their level of competence (*the Peter Principle*), or expect them to be generalists and cover roles that are beyond their strengths. As project managers responsible for the outcome of our projects, it is incumbent upon us to insure that we have the right people in the right roles. And this includes the roles responsible for managing a project.

As projects grow more complex, more organizations are beginning to separate the project administration and coordination role into a "project specialist" or "project controller" role, which frees the project manager up to actually lead and manage the project, not to mention to serve the all-important communication role. This *project manager-as-facilitator* approach is swiftly gaining popularity. Even sports coaches have assistant-coaches, trainers, specialty coaches, and a whole host of supporting staff.

6) They are Media-Savvy

It becomes evident why a coach needs all sorts of supporting administrators and coaches when we examine what a coach really needs to focus on; planning and communication. Communication not only implies communicating to the team and to upper management, but to the public as well. A coach must not only know how to field and lead a good team; he or she must know how to communicate to the media.

Likewise, project managers need to be able to focus on planning and communication. And while not every project requires communicating to the media, most will involve communicating to a broad group of stakeholders, often in a public forum. With this in mind, project managers would be wise to gain public relations, communication, and presentation skills. Studies have shown that projects are often perceived to be successful solely based on the frequency and effectiveness of the communication—irregardless of whether the project was completed on time or on budget. With effective communication and public relations, we can make up for any fluctuations due to uncertainty.

7) They Understand the Importance of Execution

In the book, *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense: Profiting From Evidence-Based Management*, authors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton pointed out the importance of execution. As an example, they stated that if playbook was all that mattered, teams would win based solely on who had the best plays. The game wouldn't need to be played. In fact, every play is designed to get one step closer to scoring a goal. The only reason it doesn't is because of the other team's response, poor execution, and a host of other variables. This is also why teams regularly practice executing their plays. The best planning can be undermined by poor execution.

In project management, we tend to focus on planning, including risk management, scheduling, budget preparation, and so on. But failure rates are still high. Part of this is in how we measure success (another topic entirely), but many failures are due to poor execution. Either someone forgot to communicate to someone, the work breakdown structure wasn't developed with all the right parties involved, the estimator didn't know how to estimate effectively, the project manager failed to defend the right plan to senior management, or any number of similar operational mishaps. If we were to spend as much time on training people to perform these operational items well as we did on preparing a project schedule, we'd have many more successful projects. After all, these are things we *can* plan for and have control over. As it is, we're too busy trying to control the uncontrollable.

Summary

As we can see, by combining adequate research and contingency planning while at the same time executing and course-correcting incrementally, we'll be better prepared to deal with uncertainty. Likewise, by having the right people in the right roles, and focusing on communication and execution, we can reduce both the impact and occurrences of surprises. Finally, since our goal is to "lead people to achieve objectives in the face of uncertainty," we can benefit from observing those who excel at this, including military leaders, CEOs, and sport coaches.

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