The Myth and Reality of Project Management

Dr. Aaron J. Shenhar
Professor of Supply Chain and Project Management
Rutgers Business School
Newark, NJ
Tel: 201-323-3246, E-mail: ashenhar@business.rutgers.edu

Extended Abstract

The conventional approach to project management is based on a predictable, fixed, relatively simple, and certain model. It is also often decoupled from changes in the market, technology, or business environment. Although the traditional approach forms the basic and necessary foundation for understanding and learning project management, it is insufficient to deal effectively with today’s dynamic, risky, and highly changing projects. According to common believes, once you created the project plan, this sets out the objectives for the project, while progress and performance are assessed against the plan and changes to the plan should be rare, and if possible avoided.

However, only few projects or programs today are fixed, certain, or simple. Rather, they are unpredictable, changing, and involve a great deal of uncertainty and complexity, and they are highly impacted by the dynamics in the environment. Virtually every successful project is undergoing changes that were unpredictable upfront, and no project is executed exactly as planned. None of these realities is currently addressed by the formal guidelines of the project management discipline.

To move beyond the traditional approach we need to look at the dynamic reality of modern projects. We therefore propose to look at the “myths” in the traditional approach to project management and contrast them with the realities of modern projects.

In this paper we discuss four myths in the traditional approach to project and risk management and contrast them with the realities of modern projects. We show that to deal with today’s dynamic projects we must adopt a more flexible, adaptive, and strategic approach to project management. We also show that this model can be applied on top of the current organizational processes to increase the chances of project success.

For each myth we present what is currently the accepted assumption and the formal approach that is used based on this assumption. We then present the reality of today’s dynamic and modern projects. We also use several real life examples to illustrate the realities. Finally we discuss the way organizations could adopt these realities on top of their current project management practices.