Change Management: A Team Effort

Developing—together—the discipline to say "no"

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CHANGE REQUESTS ARE THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT EQUIVALENT OF DEATH AND TAXES- the only thing that project managers can be certain of. Typically, as soon as the project requirements are finalized, customers send over a batch of change requests. The purpose of change management is to protect the triple constraints of time, cost and quality and the best way to do that is to fully engage the project team in implementing an effective change management plan.

The change management plan should have four components: 1) a documented change control process;2) a change control board; 3) a change control form; 4) a change control log. Together, these components form the foundation of a methodology that should be followed by the customer, team members, and any interested stakeholder of the project. The team must be involved in developing the change control process, which standardizes the handling of all change requests regardless of origin. The team must also play a role in communicating the process to all stakeholders, and in the exercise of discipline to enforce it.

The Process. The change control process should be documented in both narrative and graphical forms, in order to indicate how each change request will be handled. The initial step in the process should indicate who on the project team is responsible for receiving each change request. In the narrative, the process should indicate that only change requests approved by the customer are delivered to the project change control board. The graphic representation of the process should give a clear visual picture of how each change request makes its way from receipt to review to decision. All decision points should be clearly identified. At each decision point, there should be a direct link to the change log. An effective change control process will also include a preliminary review by the customer and project manager and a more detailed review by a change control review team. The initial review by the customer and project manager serves the purpose of screening the necessary change requests from those that are unnecessary change requests. The change control review team will be responsible for making a recommendation to the change control board based on their investigation.

The Board. Depending on the size of the project, there may be a need to have at least two layers of change control boards. The parent or primary change control board carries out the review of all appropriate change requests. On large projects, it is entirely appropriate to have a change control board that represents the various functions of the project. For example, it would be reasonable to have separate review boards for the hardware deliverables, the software components, manufacturing, installation, or testing. The purpose of these change control boards is to act as a preliminary screening board for those changes that do not represent a significant change to the project or that only affect their portion of the project. The same rigorous review should be done for these requests nonetheless. Change requests that have a significant impact should be reviewed by the parent change control board. For either level of change control boards, there should be one of three outcomes;

accepted, rejected, or deferred. A change request can be deferred if it would be included in a future release, a subsequent phase of the project, or would jeopardize the projected end date of the project. Regardless of the decision, it should be recorded in the change control log.

The Form. The change control form becomes the standard written document that captures all of the relevant information regarding the desired change request. The form should be simple enough to encourage its use and complete enough to provide the necessary information for an adequate preliminary review. The minimum contents of the form include the name of the requestor, the date of receipt, the change identification number (for tracking purposes), a description of the change, why the change is needed, the implications if the change is not done, and a signature from either the customer or the project manager to indicate that it is an approved change request. The form is highly flexible and can be customized to meet the needs of the project.

The Log. The change control log is the single location that contains all of the changes received during the life of the project. It must be simple to use and maintain. The log lists each change request by number, a brief description of the change request, date received, date reviewed, decision, status, and actions required. The change log then can be used to track to the various changes to the project requirements baseline as well as assisting in project closeout. In this closeout capacity, the change log allows the project team to verify that all changes that were approved are included in the deliverable and that changes that were denied or deferred are not included in the project deliverable.

Because change requests can come from both the customer and the team, team members must exercise discipline. Team members sometimes try to increase customer satisfaction by doing something small that they don't believe to be a change to the project requirements. These types of changes reinforce the customer's idea that changes can be done quickly and easily. Participating in the development of the change control process helps team members take ownership of their actions and also helps them say "yes, but ..." to the customer. The yes-but means that they encourage the customer to submit changes-but to submit them through the change management process.

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