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Shucking the Strategic Oyster

So they hand us a customer service project, as an example, and it looks all gnarly, like an oyster just pulled from the sea. The shell is covered with all sorts of fascinating growths, other sea creatures and long strings of algae. These are the features, fixtures and functionalities that the boss/client/user wants to see and they usually include such goodies as:

- a database - "we're not Neanderthals",
- a web site - "it's the millennium, baby, and we need to interconnect",
- training for everyone - "we need to constantly learn new skills" - new work processes - "we just can't do it the old way"
- surveys of customers, employees and people's pets - "to show we care".

And boy is it easy to get sucked in! These activities on the outside of the oyster shell are too delicious to pass up. They give us a chance to demonstrate our technical mastery of one or more of the various activities. So we dive right in, plucking one after another off the shell. Heck, the outside of the shell has months of work for everyone and as a bonus we can start immediately and impress the boss/client/user with our gung-ho spirit and the fact that we have started today.

But the problem is that none of this crap on the outside of the shell is a business relevant outcome; they are activities, not end results. And we can install systems and web pages, train until we're blue in the face and have no impact at all on customers or the outside world. No wonder senior executives tell us that less than 30% of their projects achieve any strategically relevant results for the business.

We need to shuck the strategic oyster. That's right, do the heavy work and pry those shells apart to see what's inside. What are we looking for? The pearl, a MOS™ (measure of success) for the project that tells us how executives will measure the impact of the project on the business and its customers. It'd also be nice to find the series of business relevant outcomes that will lead us to this MOS™ and when we find them, they will form the high-level achievement network (HLA™) of our project.

Why bother with shucking the oyster? Everyone from the boss/client/user on down seems happy when we get started on the activities so quickly. Well, successful project managers have bosses/clients/users who are happy at the end of the project.

What makes them happy? Projects that achieve a business relevant outcome rather than fumbling around completing activities that contribute nothing to business success.

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But prying these shells apart is difficult work and sometimes we even need to pry the sucker open with a knife. Why is it so hard? Because everyone, yes executives too, is most comfortable talking about the first few things we'll do in a project.

It's a lot harder to think about end results in specific terms. We'd much rather discuss new systems, processes and training under the vague mission of "improving customer service" than come to grips with exactly what that means. In MOS™ terms, "Resolve 80% of customer inquiries within 120 seconds with no more than a 5% callback rate on the same problem" tells us exactly what "improve customer service" means for his project. The power of shucking the strategic oyster lies in the ability it gives us to focus project efforts on that end result and thus control our scope. It also allows us to build the spine of our project, the HLAs™ that will lead us from where we are now to the MOS™.

With the oyster shucked, it might look something like the picture below with each layer an unambiguous, measured achievement. Is it easy to shuck the oyster? Nope. Executives lose all their 'wiggle' room when they sign off on a MOS™ and HLAs™ like those abbreviated above. The approval of a measure of success makes people tell us exactly what they want from a project before we start. It tells us what the organization wants to buy for all the money and time that will be invested and it also allows us to control scope changes because those too require a new measure of success and supporting achievements.

Now shucking the oyster isn't easy. We need to ask the right, polite questions to get people thinking about end results instead of means. But that will be the topic of the next PMtalk newsletter. Seeing the last step, rather than just the first few, will get you there.

To find out more about this topic, consider enrolling in a course or buy a book.



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