What’s My Line?

Guidelines for creating and communicating effective roles and responsibilities

Do any of the following scenarios sound familiar to you?

1. *Jo, the documentation manager and Peter, the quality manager are constantly bickering at each other because they both feel that they are responsible for defining documentation standards for the project*
2. *Mike, the build manager is unable to get the latest code updates in time to do the overnight build*
3. *Anna, the principal architect for the company, and project architect, is attempting to enforce a new architecture within the project, although the project is already running 6 months behind schedule*

In this article we’ll examine some of the causes of these types of issue and provide some hints and tips on how to avoid them in the future.

Over the past couple of years I’ve worked with a number of projects suffering from a common sickness - project staff didn’t fully understand what was expected of them. Actually, that probably isn’t fair. Most people do understand what is expected of them, but they do so in the broadest sense. They’ll usually try to do their best, often in dreadful circumstances; they’ll try to go the extra mile when things go pear-shaped; they’ll fill in for under-performing colleagues and they’ll try to make good their boss’ cock-ups.

We’ve created a society where job titles have largely become status symbols and rarely reflect the actual requirements of a specific position. That isn’t really a problem because a job title is really only a tag that we use to advertise ourselves in a world that knows better. For example, a “senior consultant” may be a guy with 20 years experience across the whole software development life-cycle or a university graduate with no previous work experience.

The problem becomes manifest when we start to work in an environment where expectations exist and assumptions are made about people’s roles and responsibilities, but these are not defined or communicated to either the individuals or their colleagues. There are two clear requirements here - definition and communication. These are not mutually exclusive - you must perform both activities. Let’s look at these in a bit more detail.

Project Staff Plan

When we start planning a project, regardless of the type of project, we need to build a staff or team plan. In the staff plan, typically, we're making an assessment of the profiles of the individuals required and the estimates of the number of people against each profile. The profile is the key to our roles and responsibilities definition. In the profile we should be defining, in as much detail as possible, the functions that the role is required to perform. One trick to help you achieve this is to create a job specification for each position within the project. Regardless of how your project is staffed, and more often or not you don't select the project team - you are provided with the available resources, this activity helps you to focus on the specific functional requirements of the project from a people perspective. Create the job specification as if you were hiring from an external source, but concentrate on the hard and soft skills required by the project. (For existing internal staff, it's a reasonable assumption that they already have the pre-requisite corporate requirements, so there is little point in repeating work that HR has already performed.)

A good job specification template will contain sections for essential and non-essential hard and soft skills, specific job responsibilities in terms of activities and deliverables, direct and indirect reporting lines, interactions with other project team members and other stakeholders, and expectations of joint responsibilities shared across the team (e.g. quality management and communications). Finally include details of internal and external standards expected to be followed by all members of the project. A good job specification document should adopt some of the attributes of a good requirement specification. The details need to be complete, clear, unambiguous, precise, and consistent. The need for consistency across all the job specifications is paramount, and failure to observe this will cause problems downstream.

Pooled together, the job specifications effectively become the roles and responsibility document for the project. It is critical that you consider the needs of the project when performing this activity and keep the job specifications impersonal.

Another useful tool is the RASIC matrix. RASIC stands for Responsible, Approves, Supports, Informs, Consults. The RASIC chart helps us to identify specific responsibilities and authorisations. Again, this needs to reflect the project authorisations which may not map one to one against organisational authorities.

Our RASIC matrix consists of a list of roles and the activities performed across the project. A simple example is shown below for creating and publishing a company newsletter.

	Editor	Content Provider	Communications Manager	Publisher	Marketing Manager
Editorial Content	R	I	A	I	
Articles	A	R	C	I	
Advertising	A		S	I	R
Scheduling	R	I	A	I	I
Create Web output	A	C	S	R	S
Distribution			A	C	R

With these two sets of documents, the job specifications and the RASIC matrix, you have a clear and communicable definition of the specific roles, responsibilities and interactions between the different positions across the project team. The document which then glues these together is the project organisation chart. The organisation chart must reflect the project roles and functional reporting lines but should not include people's names. At this stage the project organisational chart should be independent of any enterprise organisation chart. This may appear politically incorrect, but the needs of the project are still of primary importance, and in any case most of the functional and reporting interactions between the project and the outside world will already be defined.

The omission of names from the organisation chart is very important and is one of the keys to understanding how project roles and responsibilities differ from job titles and organisational roles. By definition, a project is a *temporary* undertaking, and individuals are assigned to a project for some or all the duration of that undertaking. A number of individual may have more than one role on the project. Some people will have additional roles and responsibilities external to the project, and will possibly have seniority outside of the project. These really need to be put aside for the duration of the project to maximise the likelihood of success. When individuals cannot achieve this the project will have a potential point of failure caused by:

- conflicts of interest
- undermining project manager's authority
- inability to collaborate as a team

In this situation the project manager should identify a risk, and the project sponsors must work to resolve the situation as quickly and diplomatically as possible.

Communicating the Staff Plan

The documentation of the project roles, responsibilities and interactions is relatively straightforward. Many organisations will have standard templates in place that the project manager can complete - if not examples can be found in abundance on the internet. But simply having a set of documents only partially completes our initial requirements. We also need to communicate the information, and to set and manage the expectations of both the overall team and the individuals within the team. Project managers often assume that everyone in the project both reads the project documentation and understands and interprets it in the same way. We all know that this is rarely the case. To overcome the invalid assumption two further activities are required. The project manager should set up a kick-off meeting for the team and arrange a series of one on one meetings with each member of the team.

One to One Meetings

One to one meetings are held prior to the kick-off meeting. These are informal sessions which may lead to actions being assigned to either or both parties, but are not minuted. The purpose of the session is for the PM to explain to the individual team member his or her specific role and responsibilities and discuss expectations. Sessions should take place for all team members, regardless of how well the relationship between the PM and the individual is established. Misunderstandings between friends or established colleagues at this early stage can cause a multitude of issues later on in the project.

This is also the opportunity for the PM to begin to address the potential issues of external project conflicts with more senior individuals assigned to the project team, and begin some damage limitation if appropriate.

Project Kick-off Meeting

The kick-off meeting is a mandatory meeting for all members of the team. It should be planned to take place as early as possible once the team has been established. Its purpose is to communicate all aspects of the project plan to the team, including project objectives, scope, schedule, and project organisation. Whilst the meeting should have an agenda and minutes recorded, there should be a free dialogue between the PM and the project staff. The primary output of the meeting is to create a shared understanding across the project team.

As far as the subject of project organisation is concerned, the PM should run through the nameless project organisation chart, key roles and responsibilities and interactions as defined in the RASIC matrix and job specifications. Once this is shared and understood a fully named organisation chart can be presented.

During this meeting the PM should reinforce the project areas where all project team members have collective responsibilities, such as quality management and communications. It is vital that collaborative activities are recognised as such and that the person "on-point" to direct these activities is supported by all members of the team.

New Starters and Reinforcement

One to one meetings should take place, as described above, whenever a new person starts on the project. There is not normally any need to hold an additional kick-off meeting for new staff unless there is a significant change in project personnel during the project. Regular project meetings can be used as induction sessions should one or two new starters join the team during the project.

However, if there are issues with the project team and the way it is functioning, it may be worth considering having an

BEHAVIOURAL ANALYSIS

Whilst the roles and responsibilities and RASIC chart define the technical and managerial interactions for the project team, there are other tools available to the project manager to assist him build a balanced and effective team. These include behavioural analysis techniques such as Myers-Briggs or Belbin analysis. By attempting to get a spread of "behavioural types" across the project, the PM can enhance the ability of team members to interact and communicate more effectively.

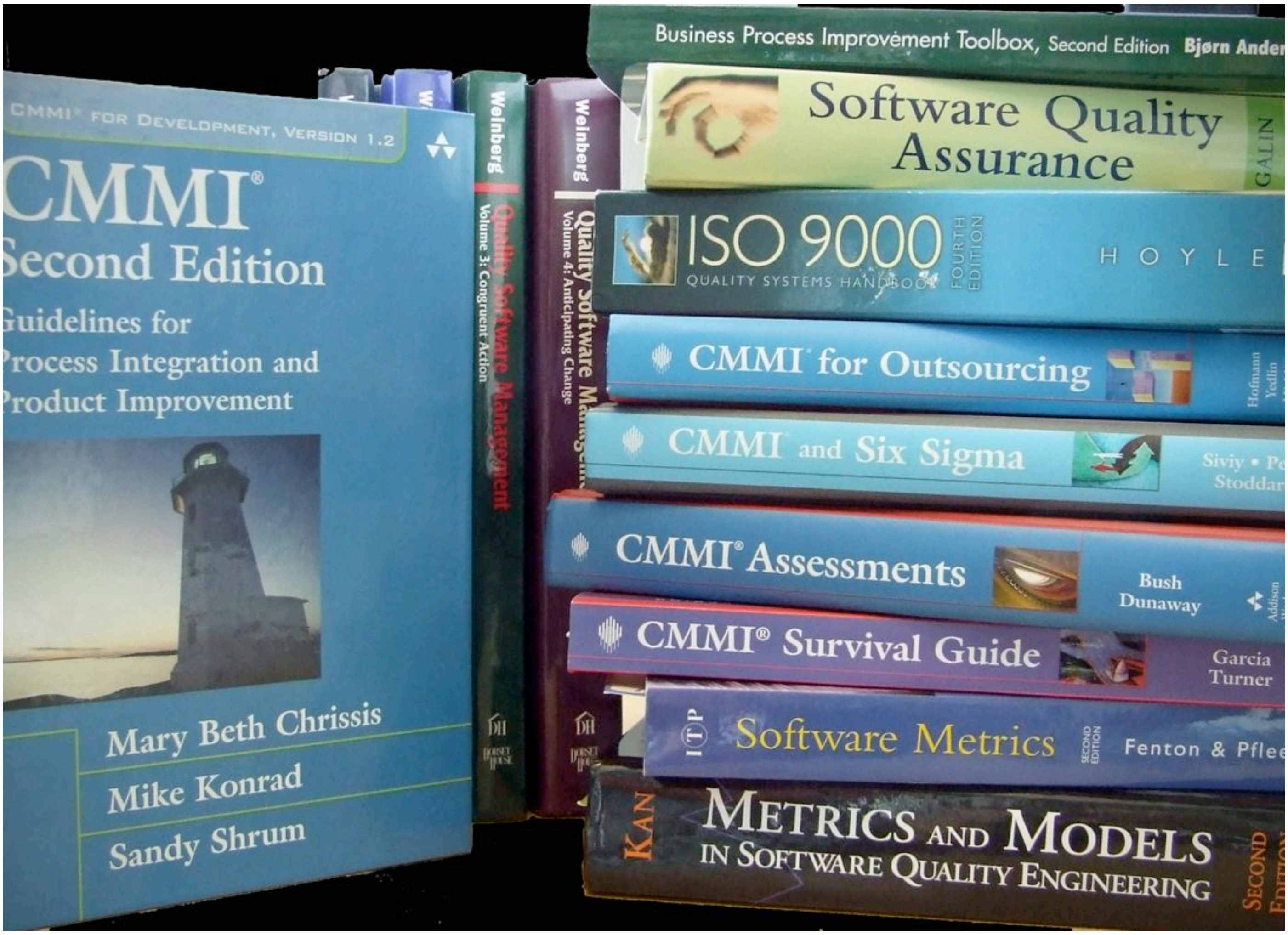
This type of activity can often be best used prior to and as part of a face to face team building activity.

additional meeting to review and reinforce the messages set out during the kick-off meeting.

Summary

- Clear and explicit definition of individual and collective roles and responsibilities is one of the key prerequisites for a project to get off to a good start. Many people need clear boundaries to help them realise what is expected of them. Job specifications and the RASIC matrix are useful tools to define roles, responsibilities and interactions
- Publication of roles and responsibilities documents is not sufficient - these need to be communicated to both individuals and the team as a whole
- Project Managers must monitor team performance and behaviour to ensure that dysfunctional behaviour is not taking place, and take corrective action where this does occur. It may be necessary to perform some realignment of roles and responsibilities, or in extreme circumstances have a team member replaced. Conversely, an individual may have inherent skills that only become visible during the project, and it may be appropriate to "promote" that person. In both cases, a reiteration of the definition and communication of the new roles and responsibilities is necessary
- New hires must go through a similar induction process when they join the project
- Roles and responsibilities of an individual in the project may be at odds with their role in the wider enterprise. The PM and sponsor should ensure that the potential for conflict is minimised as early as possible, and managed through the project lifetime

Project management is as much about communication as anything else, and some careful early preparation about the roles and responsibilities of the individuals (and the collective team) will help prevent some nasty surprises during the project. Helping your team members understand your expectations right from the start should make them feel more comfortable and allow them to focus on meeting those expectations. Now all you have to do is meet the project team's expectations of you !



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