Common Senior Executive Errors

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Executives spend a lot of time identifying the right strategies for the business that, sooner or later, turn into projects and programmes. A company's ability to implement or execute these projects, which are often large and very visible, is what often distinguishes success from failure. Based on my work with executives and global clients, I have seen key best practices that are crucial to help executives keep their fingers on the pulse of these mission critical projects. The role of the executives, or sponsors, cannot be underestimated and key areas of focus are highlighted below:

1. Communicate the connection and alignment of projects to strategy. Furthermore, articulate the value a project would bring by describing the future state and its benefits—why are we undertaking this initiative?

2. Recognise that these projects are change initiatives and refer to them in that context. It is not about the new 'order to cash' system, for example, that the organisation is launching globally; rather, it is about the change in day-to-day work of individuals that will use this new system that is going to rock their world. They need to understand why and why now, especially if they have been doing a great job the "old" way.

3. Allow enough time for planning but insist on a comprehensive plan. An all too common mistake occurs when an executive demands a time schedule or a budget that is based on data points that have nothing to do with the project itself! This is the cat and mouse game that project leaders and executives play—I know "they" will cut any number I give by 30% so I am going to double everything so I end up where I want with some contingency.

4. Demand a "range" approach for time and cost. Executives behave in a manner that sets an expectation that they want ONE number for the cost or time of the projects—I often find that this not what they want—nor should they. Communicate that you want an estimate that has no contingency, or fudge factor, built in. However, you should also expect the top ten issues or risks and the associated additional cost for each risk if it occurs, which will be funded if and when these risks occur. Communicate that risk management is key to help you make decisions especially on a portfolio level and you are supportive of moving away from the "ONE number" approach.

5. Follow through on commitments. If a project leader presents their top risk that has a price tag of an addition $1 million and it occurs, fund it. Selective memory is not the right strategy. One client has established internal contracts to document this approach as a way to help all involved to be transparent and comprehensive.

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6. Hope is not a strategy. Project managers are too optimistic. Go ahead, prove it to yourself. Ask the next 10 project mangers you run into about their projects. I think you will find a consistent answer that things are generally fine. There might be some issues here or there, but "the team will pull together and we will get it done". Demand an actionable status report that identifies issues and challenges as early as possible.

7. Collect data and capture feedback from the whole team during the implementation stage in a repeatable and credible fashion. How do you accomplish this? Leveraging technology of course! Gathering feedback from the project team including all stakeholders by using 360 degree online technology to ask questions in three areas—1) how is the project performing and is it serving its intended purpose; 2) are the processes, checkpoints and methodology being used; 3) what is the level of competency of the project manager and/or the project team—this is often critical from a client's perspective. Each of these areas can have 5-10 questions so it is not cumbersome to fill out and the data can be reported in the normal 360-degree feedback reports with strengths and blind spots that are presented by various demographic data with qualitative comments to support the numbers. Capture these insights to help you get a feel for what is happening day to day.

8. Know the right questions to ask project and programme managers. With a half-day investment of time, most executives can know enough about project management to be dangerous!

9. Attract and retain the best PMs and develop or exit low performers.

10. Measure your internal or external client satisfaction on a regular basis. Consider using Net Promoter Score (NPS) or other approaches to measure client satisfaction quantitatively.