

Project Management: A Foundation for Leadership Transition

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Abstract

Leadership transitions present a myriad of challenges to organizations. In the Federal government, Senior Executives are expected to move around their organizations and lead in multiple contexts based on agency need. The American Community Survey Office (ACSO) at the Census Bureau recently experienced a change in Chiefs. This paper describes how well-established project management practices served to smooth the transition between Senior Executives and enabled critical business decision-making to continue even early in the transition.

Beginning in 1998, the U.S. Census Bureau made it a business priority to inculcate the globally recognized Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) throughout the fabric of the organization. Over the course of time, the Census Bureau has built a cadre of managers who are skilled in applying the PMBOK to their work, fostering strides in operations, planning, budgeting, and innovating at the agency. The years of constructing, adjusting, and strengthening a solid Census Bureau project management infrastructure have paid off in impressive business outcomes and organizational stability through leadership transitions

By describing the correlation between effective project management and leadership success through a transition, this paper will provide examples of benchmarks, lessons learned, and leadership practices that may serve other public or private organizations as they endeavor to lead through change.

Background

The United States Census Bureau is a leading source of quality data about the people and economy of our nation. It administers and analyzes over 130 surveys, which provide vital statistical support to American communities, businesses, and government agencies.¹ This work is successfully executed thanks in part to precision synchronization of thousands of activities through the full complement of project management infrastructure that the Census Bureau has developed over the last 18 years. Through project management, leaders at the organization plan, monitor, and adjust a broad variety of activities needed to carry out the mission. Some of those activities include budgeting, training survey administrators, conducting research for continuous survey improvement, creating billions of estimates based on survey data, engaging over 250,000 stakeholders (each with unique concerns, needs, and interests), and teaching data users how to use census data.² However, what makes it unique from other agencies is that the operational pace and resource expenditures necessarily balloon cyclically to accommodate the Decennial Census,

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/are-you-in-a-survey/survey-list.html>.

² Internal Census Records.

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which is the largest peacetime mobilization existing in the United States. As such, the Census Bureau is in a perpetual state of operational expansion and contraction, which requires the stability and agility afforded through project management.

In the late 1990's the U.S. Census Bureau was busily preparing for the 2000 Decennial Census, when it received a report from the National Performance Review that highlighted critical performance management failures such as missed deadlines and spending that exceeded budgets. As a result, leaders at the Census Bureau moved swiftly to partner with ESI International Inc. and George Washington University (GWU) to create a Project Management Master's certificate program. Leaders created staff cohorts to receive the training. Subsequently, the 2000 Decennial Census was completed at \$2 billion under budget which is in part attributed to the project management infrastructure created by the first cohorts who received their certificates and applied their learning in the workplace.³ Over the years, over 2,800 Census Bureau employees have earned either the ESI/GWU certificate, or the citation (which was created to provide a more affordable option), and worked together to build a solid project management infrastructure that undergirds operational success at the Census Bureau. Members of the Senior Executive Service are pivotal figures in project management at the Census Bureau. As leaders in the organization, they depend on the project management system to provide them with the necessary insight to plan, lead initiatives, manage risk, and navigate transitions confidently and successfully.

Senior Executive Service: An Overview

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 established the Senior Executive Service for the purpose of ensuring “that the executive management of the Government of the United States is responsive to the needs, policies, and goals of the Nation and otherwise is of the highest quality.”⁴ The 7,000-plus members of the Senior Executive Service are highly skilled managers who often work their way up through the ranks in Federal civil service. They are expected to have mastery of core management functions that can be used in multiple environments, so that they may be rotated around their agencies, or as envisioned in 1978, even across the Federal government. However, a 2009 study co-authored by the Partnership of Public Service and Booz Allen Hamilton Inc. revealed that most Senior Executives remain in the same Federal agency throughout the course of their careers where they primarily engage in operational as opposed to strategic management.⁵ This situation may be remedied by a new Executive Order, “Strengthening the Senior Executive Service”, released on December 15, 2015. This order is requiring agencies to submit plans for SES rotation outside of their agencies. With this development, people who serve in the Senior Executive Service may benefit further from using project management to facilitate transition.

Because Senior Executives experience movement across their organizations, they must become adept at leadership transition. Employees and leaders alike can experience leadership transition

³ From a July 2012 interview with the then Census Director-Robert Groves on “The Federal Drive” on Federal News Radio by Tom Termin and Emily Kopp.

⁴ CSRA 1978 Title V Subchapter 2 Section 3131

⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.boozallen.com/content/dam/boozallen/media/file/reimagining-the-senior-executive-service-2009.pdf>

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as something akin to crisis, even under the best of circumstances. It's not hard to imagine how all involved in the transition may experience a sense of uncertainty, mistrust, and even feelings of grief and loss. Amidst transition, manager and employees alike look for stability as new learning displaces routine, and new relationships are forged.^{6,7} It is during these times when a project management system offers a constancy that proves to be the foundation of a successful leadership transition. It provides a common framework that employees and leaders can use as a platform for clear communication. Stempowski found that the use of familiar terminology and processes foster transparency of expectations which assists in developing trust, as well as accelerating understanding of initiatives. Further, the constancy and familiarity facilitates rational decision-making on a neurological level amidst the pressures of transition as described below.⁸

A leadership transition can elicit emotions such as anxiety, fear, and even grief and loss that have the ability to impede rational thought processes. Specifically, the brain's "conflict regulator", the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), and ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), the brain's "balance sheet" play a large part in how leaders synthesize leadership transition.⁹ The ACC, which is connected to the amygdala¹⁰ but can be accessed by the conscious mind, impacts attention.¹¹ It can become overstimulated in the face of conflict, distracting thinkers from focusing on problems at hand. When it is overstimulated, the ability to focus on process can assist the thinker to stay focused. For example, pain studies have demonstrated that the amount of pain experienced by individuals are not actually related to the pain itself, but rather how much that person focuses on the pain.¹² The project management process is a pathway to solutions, and by focusing on that process, leaders can see a pathway away from the psychological pain caused by an existing unresolved problem. Without a process to maintain focus, the leader could languish by overthinking the problem; therein remaining in a cycle of pain or lack of resolution with an overstimulated ACC.

When it is functioning at its best, the vmPFC balances risk, delay, and ambiguity, which is something a project management system assists leaders to accomplish.¹³ Project management processes provide a structure that disrupts the potential for emotional hijacking of the brain. Trust in and familiarity with the project management process disrupts the cycle of negative emotions, which often occur at a subconscious level and are thus difficult to control, allowing a leader to focus on the facts at hand.¹⁴ The project management system shifts the focus of a leader's mind from "imminent threat" to a framework for understanding the tasks at hand. While

⁶ McNatt, D. B., & Judge, T. A. (2008). Self-efficacy intervention, job attitudes, and turnover: A field experiment with employees in role transition. *Human Relations*, 6 (6), 783-810

⁷ Nicholson, N. (1984). A Theory of Work Role Transitions. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 29 (2), 172-191

⁸ Amanda L. Ingram Olkin, Yulia R. Gel. (2016). *Leadership and Women in Statistics*. CRC Press. 175.

⁹ Srinivasan S. Pillay. (2011). *Your Brain and Business: The Neuroscience of Great Leaders*. Pearson Education Inc. 197.

¹⁰ The amygdala is part of the limbic system and regulates emotions.

¹¹ Ibid 196.

¹² Ibid. 197.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid 198.

daily tasks present challenges to leaders, the high emotions associated with a leadership transition puts them at greater risk for thought and solution disruption where no project management system, exists.

Leadership Transition at the American Community Survey Office

In the spring of 2015 at the Census Bureau, the American Community Survey (ACS) experienced the transition of its top leader, a Senior Executive. The ACS is one of the better-known surveys that the Census Bureau manages. It is a comprehensive survey that replaced the long form of the Decennial Census. Each year, the ACS is disseminated to a sample of 3.5 million people. It was designed as an improvement over the long form both to ensure that communities of small populations and small geographies are counted, and that data is available annually as opposed to every ten years. In fact, the ACS is the most reliable source of information about the people in our communities and how our communities are changing. People in state and local regions use the wealth of information provided by the ACS for a wide variety of purposes, including comprehensive planning, economic development, emergency management, and broadening understanding about local issues and conditions. Businesses rely on ACS data to make key marketing, location, and financial decisions to serve customers and create jobs; when combining these expenditures with the more than \$400 billion distributed annually by the Federal government based on ACS data, this survey impacts over \$1 trillion worth of investments into our nation's communities each year.¹⁵

A central part of the business of the ACSO is to remain agile and cost-effective in the face of omnipresent emerging information needs. In this environment, it engages in research for continuous improvement on meeting those needs along with improving data quality and the experience of survey respondents. In order to carry out this research, ACSO assembles integrated project teams, works with subject matter experts, and tests the outcome of making changes to many activities that impact the survey. Some of those activities include employing new survey methodologies, improving field and telephone protocol, testing alternative survey packaging, and adjusting the sample. All of this research is one of many initiatives at ACSO that require fully-informed oversight to ensure that progress continues even through a change in ACSO leadership. Therefore, upon taking the helm as the new ACSO Chief, Deborah Stempowski immediately employed the project management system to quickly assess research project progress with views of schedule, milestones, staffing, budgets, and risks. Because of the level of effort ACS devotes to research, its project management system is quite mature as well as very familiar to staff. As a complement to the research processes, ACS also employs a similar structure to the management of its ongoing survey.

While the operational environment was new to Stempowski, the constants of the project management infrastructure were quite familiar to her. Because of Census' strong project management culture, both Stempowski and her staff were familiar with project management language and processes, allowing them to speak a common language to address the funding

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. (August 18, 2015). Agility in Action: A Snapshot of Enhancements to the American Community Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2015-16-survey-enhancements/agility-in-action.html>

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issue. Indeed, the project management system served as a channel for her new staff to communicate with her about their steadily advancing research initiatives, for it gave all involved a common language to work together. The familiarity accelerated Stempowski's assimilation of the information at hand. For example, early in her term, Stempowski was faced with significant funding delays for annual research projects. Even though she was not familiar with all the details of the projects, Stempowski was able to use project management language, tools and techniques to guide her staff in conducting an assessment of the resulting impact from the funding delays. Using risk management and schedule management techniques, she and her staff were able to identify the impact from the schedule delays, and then identify mitigation plans and actions. The project management infrastructure gave her questions to ask about the work, questions which could be anticipated by staff based on their regular engagement with the project management system. She knew what to look for, and they knew what she would want to know, which understandably increased everyone's comfort level. It signaled the beginning of a relationship bound by trust, which is a pillar of efficacy in the working world. The project management system not only smoothed the transition, but shortened the transition period such that normal operations were not affected by senior leadership turnover. Additionally, project management supplied the basis for rational decision-making amidst the pressures of the transition.

Project Management at the American Community Survey Office

One benefit of the way project management is practiced at the ACSO is its simplicity and integration with the Census Bureau-wide management process. A strong governance foundation provided by the ACSO Program Management Governance Board (PMGB) reinforces the project management infrastructure at ACSO. The PMGB brings together key stakeholders from senior leadership across the Census Bureau and follows established program and project management processes through a lifecycle, similar to those in use across the Census Bureau. The lifecycle begins with new work requests and moves through decision-making, planning, execution and control, then finally closeout. The PMGB monitors each phase in the lifecycle, makes critical decisions at important milestones and makes requests for adjustments where needed. It also provides status updates to senior leadership in the Decennial Directorate as well as the Operating Committee, a senior executive oversight committee chaired by the Chief Operating Officer of the Census Bureau. Each phase of the lifecycle addresses critical oversight needs. Figure 1 below illustrates the ACSO Project Management Lifecycle. Each lifecycle component is described in the section that follows.

Figure 1. ACSO Project Management Lifecycle

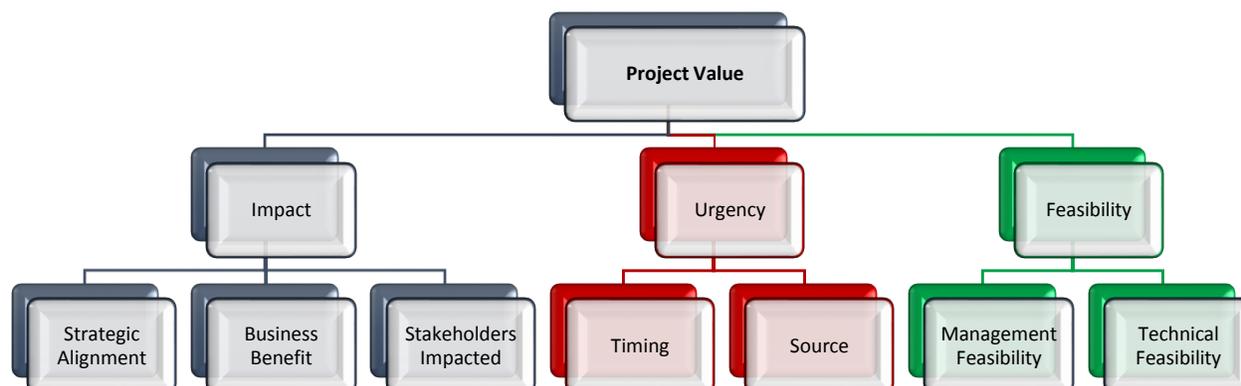


1) New **work requests** begin with a short document that includes a brief description of the work, a rough estimate of the resources and a high level milestone schedule. Requestors review lessons learned from similar projects and incorporate them into the attributes of the request. Work requests are created for all work including mandatory and unfunded, that are not considered ongoing operations and maintenance for the ACS.

2) **Decision-making** by the PMGB is supported by a discussion of the work request as well as scoring the work request and its potential impact and risks against the ACS strategic objectives it supports. Because the PMGB has broad representation from all operational areas, including those outside of ACSO, various viewpoints are part of the process and all stakeholders are aware and informed even for projects outside of their usual scope and authority.

Even mandatory work requests are scored so the relative score can be compared to other work in the ACS portfolio. Projects are also assigned a tier level at that time so that appropriate oversight can be implemented from the project start. The PMGB assigned tiers are informed by scoring criteria which include a comprehensive consideration of the project's value as illustrated in the Figure 2 below. The PMGB also explores potential project risk, visibility, costs, and degree of complexity. It also looks at how completely the requestor defines the project and all its parameters along with how well the committee understands the work request itself.

Figure 2. Pre-Decisional Consideration of Project Value



Decision-making can have a variety of outcomes: approved, denied or deferred.

3) **Planning** after a project is approved requires that requestors develop a robust resource-loaded project schedule that follows ACS standards and guidelines for schedules. These standards cover baselines, task-level details such as duration, logic, order, and constraints. They also address standards for reporting, software fields, oversight, and dependency network. Project milestones must be documented. Once the schedule is in place and resources, both staff and funds, are identified and secured, the project enters the execution and control phase.

4) **Execution and Control** is the longest phase in the process. By following the guidelines and standards associated with the oversight tier assigned during the decision making process, project managers use consistent practices to monitor and report on the status of the work. Risk and issue identification and management are key components of this phase, with monthly project management reviews (PMRs) that provide an opportunity to address challenges with the triple constraint (budget, schedule, scope) as well as quality that is affected by all three constraints.

5) **Project Close-out**, the final phase, provides an opportunity for the ACSO staff to reflect on work that has been completed and document lessons learned, which encompass both good practices and areas for improvement. At this time, the PMGB and ACSO acknowledge that staff who completed the work are now available for new assignments. At the close of this phase, ACSO employees take care to update the ACS portfolio to show that the work is complete. By presenting to the PMGB as part of the project close-out phase, managers are informed and can communicate with their staffs appropriately.

Conclusion

Even within an organization like the Census Bureau that has a solid project management infrastructure, there can be differing opinions about the value of project management. Some may perceive it as a futile bureaucratic process that consumes significant time and staff resources while overlooking the strategic value of consistency, continuity and delivery on strategic goals and objectives. When working within a complex system such as a Federal agency, schedules

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have thousands of moving parts which must be monitored, analyzed, coordinated, and updated, in order to both remain functional and achieve success. Risks need to be managed, budgets need to be monitored and scope needs to be controlled through sound project management practices. Though daily operations present multiple stresses to leaders and their staff alike, managing through a leadership transition presents special challenges associated with adapting to change. Some of our knowledge about neuroscience suggests that project management could assist all involved with leadership transition to stay focus and minimize potential distractions brought on by emotional response to change.

Not all leaders see the value in the consistent investment in project management. However, in the case of the ACSO, for Stempowski and her staff, it provided value through the seamless operation of the office during leadership transition. The bevy of complex research projects that were in play when she arrived continued without interruption, as Stempowski used the project management system to rapidly make sense of their multiple, interdependent moving parts. Indeed, project management can be credited for enabling tremendous public value to our nation's communities through the rigorous process it represents with the successful delivery of the ACS and all the ancillary activities the ACS drives. The strong governance foundation provided by the ACSO PMGB supports key stakeholders from senior leadership across the Census Bureau and reinforces established program and project management processes, similar to those in use across the Census Bureau. The project management-inspired environment provides the stability necessary to facilitate smooth transitions in leadership for continuity of operations and focus. As illustrated by the example of SES transition at the Census Bureau, other organizations may benefit from developing or strengthening an existing project management system to stay focused through the operations disruption and emotional responses caused by leadership change. For members of the Senior Executive Service who may soon be rotating across agencies, this may hold a special significance.