



Pre-Project Assumptions

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When starting a project, everybody involved has a set of assumptions that they bring about the project. Some are about how it should be done, how best to do it or who should do it and so on and so on. But, there are another set of assumptions that I will call “Pre-Project assumptions”. Some people might even consider these “givens” or “obvious” and not assumptions at all. Culture (any type – organizational, geographical, etc), philosophy, personality type(s) and a myriad of other work and non-work variables produce pre-project assumptions . And, usually these are the non-spoken, non-discussed part of the project. Sometimes, as my airplane example below shows, they are celebrated by an organization as a market differentiator.

Even though these are hidden, pre-project assumptions affect every project that the organization does. And, it affects the project **BEFORE** the project ever gets going.

Here is a high level example to better explain what I mean. If a Project Manager is tasked with a technology project to “Add a new server” to the company’s computer system there a whole set of assumptions that affect the project before the PM starts looking for more detailed information. Some of those pre-project assumptions might be:

1. Since we are a Unix based computer center, we will add another Unix server. (Or, Windows Server for a Windows based center, etc.)
2. This new server will be for a business application.
3. Since I am the PM and I don’t work in procurement, “Add a new server” means I only have to worry about the software and application and not the hardware.
4. I know a certain operating system better than the others, so that is the one I will make work with this new server – no matter what.

(Not all pre-project assumptions are bad to have – like assuming that adding a new server at a company is for a business application and not for those wanting to play Halo online.)

So, what’s my point? Well, pre-project assumptions affect every project - and need to be addressed! A Project Manager needs to know what they (and other stakeholders) are assuming from the very start and so should the team members. There may be quick, easy and solid agreement among the team about what those assumptions are – but it should be discussed. Some pre-project assumptions are naturally discussed as the project is assessed (like the operating system might be determined by the server type), but most are not talked about.

What got me thinking about this in general is an example of pre-project assumptions with deadly consequences. After the crash of Flight 447 on June 1, 2009, I learned about a critical set of pre-project assumptions that Airbus believes in. They have the philosophy that technology is less fallible than human intervention. They believe that the technology of the plane should override the pilots’ actions –



or make it very difficult for a pilot to make the “final decision” about any action. This is not the philosophy of Boeing. The Boeing philosophy is that the pilot can easily override the technology of the plane. (At the time of this writing, it is widely believed that the plane crashed mainly due to computer malfunction.)

So, when a Project Manager at Airbus is asked to “Build a Plane” they have the pre-project assumption that the technology put into the plane can’t be overridden by the pilot. This affects the decisions of the project before the first work package is every built or a schedule is put on paper. The same project at Boeing to “Build a Plane” has the opposite assumption. The pre-project assumptions that each company has affects the cockpit design, the control systems, displays and other features. These can have life-and-death consequences. People can argue amongst themselves about which assumption is right or wrong but this is one assumption that affect how each company builds a plane.

Think of this from a customer point of view. If you are an airline about to purchase a new airplane it would be good to know about this assumption because it affected the design of the end product. Both manufacturers have similar technology on their planes that does the same basic functions so this isn’t about who has the better wiring. And, this philosophy may not be reflected in the final price of the plane or a visual difference between the two planes, but the pre-project assumption affects how the plane works.

While most Project Managers don’t deal with life-or-death pre-project assumptions, they do bring a set of assumptions with them that affect the end product. The assumptions might be subtle, they may affect only the schedule and not the end product or it may be obvious to the end customer. Either way, the pre-project assumptions should be addressed because they will affect your project!

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