Lucidus Consulting

LUCID THOUGHT

36 { Make it exciting not boring...

During a five-day learning event with one of the world's top 'blue chip' organisations we focussed on managing project risks, both opportunities and threats, from a senior manager's point of view. Although not included in the event's title its subtext was really **'managing risk management'** as those attending weren't actually responsible for 'doing it', rather they were accountable for making sure it happened efficiently and effectively. As we were often reminded the buck stopped with them for risk management on their projects.

The organisation concerned considers improving risk management to be fundamental to the future success of its projects; a sentiment commonly expressed by many organisations at the moment. Like others, our client believes that the prime enabler for the risk management process is the risk workshop. However a recurring theme throughout the learning event was that the risk workshop format used by the organisation was time consuming, ineffective and more pointedly 'boring' and what is needed is a means to make workshops 'exciting' and hence effective in managing project risks. Their typical experience is that risk workshops last for two days, are attended by many (perhaps too many) people and follow a rigid agenda. The aim is to understand the context of the project, identify risks that might effect objectives, assess each risk for its probability and impact, assign owners to each risk and then come up with a response plan.

You might think that this is a pretty standard and 'best practice' approach to running a risk workshop and it is, but for them it just

doesn't work. The prime reason given is that it takes too long, people lose interest and therefore the objective of identifying and prioritising those risks that would really have a major effect should they occur is not achieved. Yet the same process/format is used again and again without making any real changes. Someone reminded us the other day that Albert Einstein defined stupidity **"as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."** We are not stupid, the organisation we were with last month does not employ stupid people, so if risk workshops are ineffective why do we persist in running them in the same way again and again? We believe that the answer lies in an obsession that the risk workshop is the only way to properly identify risks (primarily using brainstorming) and then once you have everyone captured in one place you might as well continue with assessment and response planning. Undoubtedly this has some merits, perhaps at the beginning of a project, at a major milestone or after a significant change, but when it is used exclusively it can be repetitive and uninspiring. Good risk management requires open, creative minds, not closed 'handle-turning' behaviours.

So how do we stop risk workshops from becoming tedious and as a result more productive? How can the tried and tested process be tailored to suit the particular circumstances? Some of our ideas are:

- **Carrying out pre-workshop activities by asking attendees to consider the sources of uncertainty (cause of risks) that are concerning them most at the moment.** In addition, or alternatively, you might want to ask them to identify five opportunities and five threats (note the emphasis on an equal number of each) before attendance. Both of these would certainly speed up the process of risk identification.

Creating Value by Shedding Light on Managed Change
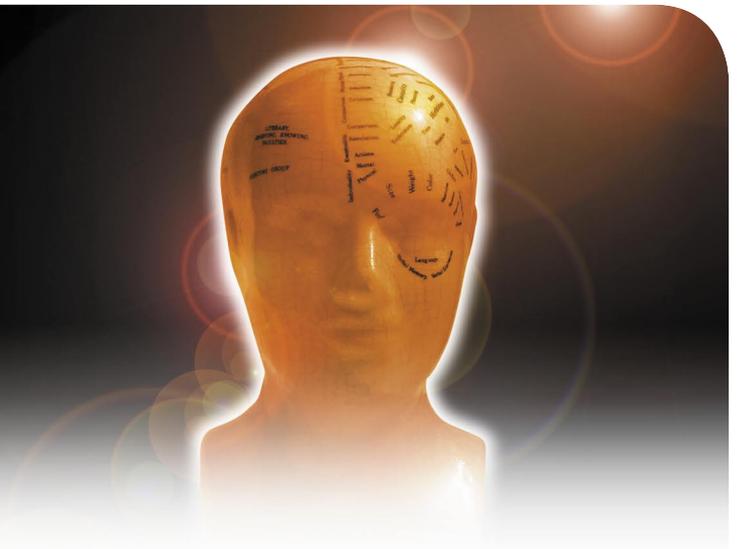
- **Focussing a risk workshop only on one project objective e.g. cost or schedule or quality or health and safety.** Trying to identify all the risks that might affect any of the objectives can be quite distracting especially if one objective is considered to be more important than others. In a world where health and safety dominates then this often completely takes over the risk identification process.
- **Reducing the duration of the face-to-face workshop.** Even though a two-day workshop may be the most practical use of time if attendees are literally travelling from afar to attend, if it is repeated again and again then we have observed that it really doesn't work well. We suggest that you consider virtual meetings; perhaps using one of the new web-based meeting tools or even video conferencing. Shorter, sharper interventions may well be more effective.
- **Using smaller groups of between five and eight people.** Smaller groups can be assembled faster and be more focussed. They also lend themselves better to virtual meetings. It may be possible to ask individuals to represent a range of stakeholder interests. If people are acting as advocates for others, not just putting their own point of view, this may counter inherent biases in the process?
- **Reducing the scope of the workshop to just identifying risks or maybe identifying and assessing risks; leaving assignment of owners and response planning to a later time.** Assignment of owners and development of responses can take place 'off-line' by discussion with a risk coordinator, the Project Manager and other members of the project team. This is far more efficient than involving everyone in a risk workshop in the discussion. Of course if a critical risk is identified during a workshop it might not be appropriate to say **"we'll deal with that until later".**
- **Last but not least whatever format of risk workshop is used it is essential that an experienced facilitator is used.** Using an experienced facilitator alone might it itself make a risk workshop 'exciting not boring'. Experienced facilitators are often familiar with many creative techniques that can in themselves be fun to apply such as de Bono's 'six thinking hats' or Crawford's 'slip technique' (more commonly known today as using Post-it Notes®). In addition an experienced facilitator will know when to change the environment in order to maximise the effectiveness of the workshop.

Organisations recognise the importance of risk management, but few make the process work well. Risk workshops that result in poor risk descriptions, arbitrary assessments of probability and impact and meaningless prioritisation, and give no time for thought through response planning and contingency planning may well be a complete waste of money. One aspect of making risk workshops work is to think how you can vary common practices in order to engage and inspire participants rather than bore them to death.

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