



Where now for the Critical Chain?

By Carl Pritchard, PMP, US correspondent, Project Manager Today



The *American Heritage Dictionary* refers to a chain as a connected, flexible series of links. Critical Chain project management might well be captured by the same description. It has been almost ten years since Eliyahu Goldratt published his landmark work, *The Critical Chain*, and in that decade the concept has proliferated, become a standardized practice (complete with certified critical chain 'Jonahs') and has evolved to the point where practitioners feel comfortable arguing about the practice and the nuances of implementation. So is it here to stay? And to grow?

Larry Leach, President of Advanced Projects, Inc. (www.advanced-projects.com) and author of *Critical Chain Project Management*, says critical chain is 'coming along.' He says that he is thankful that critical chain was included in the 3rd Edition of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMI), but he's a little distressed that they 'got it wrong.' He says that 'They called it a network analysis technique. And while it includes a network analysis technique, it's more about management behaviour and action.'

He says the true bellwether of whether or not critical chain is accepted will be when (or if) it's included in Microsoft Project. He points out that we're getting close to that moment. 'There are a whole bunch of add-ins at this time and there's a stand-alone software package out there.' But he's still waiting for the inclusion of critical chain in the basic Microsoft Project package.

There are other signs that critical chain and the 'Theory of Constraints (ToC)' are entrenched and growing. Bill McClelland, President of Operations for the North America Group for the Goldratt Institute (www.goldratt.com) says the best evidence may be in the amount of business the Goldratt Institute is

doing. 'We remain pretty busy. That's always a good sign.' He lists active clients ranging from the Lockheed to Intel, and from Microsoft to LSI Logic.

'One of the largest multi-project implementations (for ToC) project management is the flight test centre at Edwards Air Force Base in California. They have used ToC project management to centralise a very decentralised project management practice.' McClelland says the fact that the Goldratt Institute has even had to turn a few requests for business over to other qualified consultants, rather than do the work themselves, is perhaps the best evidence that critical chain is alive and well and growing at a healthy pace.

The headway that's being made is not all just business. It's also philosophical. Leach (a certified PMP and a 'Jonah's Jonah'—an instructor of Jonahs) says some major inroads are being achieved in the US Department of Defense. 'The Marines, Navy and Air Force are all applying critical chain in their environments with varying degrees of success. It's not uniformly successful because it requires behavioural change to get folks beyond their anti-critical-chain behaviours.' He stresses that those behaviours are driven by the fact that critical chain practice requires behavioural change.

'The primary management behaviour that has to change is to work to enable workers to focus seriously on one task at a time. That requires them to prioritise projects and to have a method by which they convey to workers what to work on next. That sounds simple. But in practice, it's pretty hard. There are a whole bunch of people who are doing it well...but most are mid-size companies. It's easier for management to get a hold of it in a midsize environment than in a larger company. There's less institutionalization of behaviour.'

McClelland echoes Leach's sentiments. 'People tend to come to us because they recognise they're not doing as well in project management as they'd like to be. The story we tell resonates with organisations heavily engaged in multi-project management.' He suggests that there's a lot of bad multi-tasking that's going on, with people drifting from task to task and having to constantly reorient themselves to the work at hand. McClelland adds that the improvements from ToC and critical chain don't all come easy to organisations. 'They can see how this will help their organisation, but they do tend to

underestimate what it will take to get people moving in the right direction. It means that leadership needs to have different expectations and lead differently. If you don't get the support at the top, you're not going to have a successful implementation.'

McClelland says the heart of critical chain is getting organisations to look at the multi-project portfolio differently. He says the competing pressures of business opportunities and limited resources drive organisations to miss commitments. 'Helping organisations to break that conflict is exactly what ToC project management is all about. If you synchronize your work properly on the more heavily loaded resources, you can find between 30-50 percent more capacity to do the work.'

While he's optimistic that critical chain can solve a lot of organisational challenges, he stresses that the rewards come with a price. 'It's a culture change. People who want instant gratification are going to be disappointed. It requires a heavy investment of time and energy. It takes a while to make significant changes in how project management is done.' McClelland points out that some project managers thrive on the chaos that accompanies typical project work. He says they seem to actually enjoy 'walking down the hall...and taking names.' He emphasises that 'They lose that kind of capability [in ToC project management] because it's no longer necessary. It's far less chaotic than normal PM. They love being the hero and sorting the mess out.' That environment largely evaporates over time when critical chain is properly applied. 'It's a culture change.'

Will the practice continue on a growth curve? 'As more and more people get to know about the organisations that have had success, it's bound to grow and get into more areas where project management is a critical factor.' And while there are numerous success stories, McClelland contends that it's not a practice for the timid in large, multi-project organisations. 'The benefits are enormous, but unless you're willing to walk all the way down this path...don't start the journey. Abandoning a significant culture change mid-stream sends a bad message to the organisation.'

As for the decade ahead, Leach sees even broader application. He believes it will become the standard way to implement projects. 'It reduces the stress of doing multiple projects, because people are being asked to do too much.'