

## Lighter Grip and More Awareness



Managing projects is like riding a bike. When you first learn to ride a bike it is normal to grip the handlebars really tightly and look at your hands or feet as you concentrate hard on the new “riding” task and try not to fall off. The problem with looking at your hands or feet while cycling is that you will not see the rock or pothole in the road ahead until it is too late and so, despite your best efforts, you will fall off. It is actually safer to relax, loosen your grip on the handlebars a little, and look further up the road to spot obstacles in plenty of time to avoid them.

The same goes for project management, when we are new to the role it is normal to focus on the project plans, progress against the plan, and budget consumed too closely. We focus so much on these project management tasks that we fail to see the issues and risks (rocks and potholes) the project is headed towards, until it is too late. While plans, progress and budgets are all critical elements, we can bring more value to the project by releasing our obsession on these project metrics slightly and focussing more of our attention down the road to items like sponsor satisfaction and team morale. There is little point having a perfectly executed project plan and a full set of EVA metrics if the project gets cancelled or half the team quits.

## Specification vs Collaboration

Closely linked to Control and Communication is Specification and Collaboration. We can try to specify everything down to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree of detail and then hope we got the spec right and whoever is developing the product develops exactly to specification. Or, we can explain our goals at a high level and then work in closer collaboration with the developer to achieve our desired results. Agile methods recommend the second option, getting the customers working in closer collaboration with the development team to ensure the right product gets built. This works well for many types of software project where it is difficult to fully articulate the complete requirements upfront. However, it is not just the software world that is switching to collaboration over specification.

Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams in their book Wikinomics tell how collaboration is increasingly winning out to specification. Today’s aircraft are highly complex networks of sub-systems, parts and software; and Boeing’s new 787 Dreamliner is about as big and complex as commercial aircraft currently get. From its ground breaking remote diagnostics that communicate component usage and wear statistics to the ground in real time via satellite communications; to its novel composite material wings that save weight, the aircraft is new and extremely complex.

When Boeing sent the specifications to the electronics supplier for the 777 (the predecessor to the 787) the document was over 2500 pages. The equivalent specification document for the 787 is a mere 20 pages, how is this possible? Boeing, who are experts in specification and control, learned that to tackle a

project of this magnitude they had to form closer relations with their suppliers and learn how to co-create and collaborate like never before. While it would be wrong to say: “Gone are all the detailed specs” the major shift is to increased collaboration with suppliers and less reliance upon specification.

Many industries are tapping into the benefits of increased collaboration over contract negotiation that are also embraced by agile methods. With increased collaboration comes shared decision making as well. In the past, Boeing gave the orders like a drill sergeant, and suppliers complied. Rarely did it matter if the supplier had a better idea – Boeing wanted components built exactly to specification. This time, Boeing has given all of its partners a vote on matters that affect them. Boeing and its partners are reaping the benefits as they work together on solutions and adapt to realize unanticipated benefits.

As project managers there is much to gain by taking an agile approach. Like riding a bike we need to master the basics of project management first; but then we can better tap into the creativity of and problem solving abilities of our teams by using lighter controls and increased collaboration.

Mike Griffiths is an independent consultant specializing in effective project management. Mike was involved in the creation of DSDM in 1994 and has been using agile methods (Scrum, FDD, XP, DSDM) for the last 13 years. He serves on the board of the Agile Alliance and the Agile Project Leadership Network (APLN). He maintains a leadership and agile project management blog at [www.LeadingAnswers.com](http://www.LeadingAnswers.com).