

What Product Development Style is Right for You?

There are three fundamental organizing principles you may want to consider in any product development project or, for that matter, in any project that has multi-disciplinary complexity. For any given project, do you count primarily on the project's Management ("M"), your Processes ("P") or the power of your Team ("T") to make sure you generate the best potential result?

These three organizing principles all tend to exist in any effort to some extent but there is almost a primary style that dominates. That choice can be the difference between success and failure.

Which style should be your primary product development project organizing principle?

Not surprisingly, there is no "one-size-fits-all" answer. Most organizations have a primary style that is dominant because of the way the organization has evolved or the bias of leaders as they created a new organization. The challenge is to understand what might work best and then moving from doing things the way they've always been done to do things in a way that may yield the best results. From what I've seen, new organizations tend to develop in an "M" (Management) centric way. Sometimes they evolve beyond this approach, sometimes they don't. Occasionally, they may develop more of a "T" (Team) centric approach. Rarely do they start off "P" (Process) centered. More mature organizations may be M, P or T centric depending on the path they took to get there.



Management

M centric organizations have an unambiguous leader for each effort. In small organizations it may be a single leader for every effort, perhaps a VP or CTO. Larger organizations may have evolved to have project or program managers or other senior people who play those roles when needed. When M is the primary organizing principle, on any given effort this leader is the organizer, scheduler, risk manager, interdependency tracker, glue, catcher of anything falling through the cracks and one stop shop for all information about what is and what will be for the project. Others on the project are puzzle pieces that require coordination. There may be processes and/or some notion of teams but it is clear that they are secondary to the strong leadership role. This style clarifies decision making as well as provides for one "neck to choke" if things don't go well. The key challenge in this style is that complex, inter-disciplinary efforts can be quick to exceed the capacity (especially if the person has other work to perform) and/or capability of all but a super-hero. Unfortunately, they are hard to find and if you have one, the approach still doesn't scale. When mere mortals attempt to do this on challenging projects without a lot of support from P or T, things seem hard to get done, there are a lot of surprises, and missing expectations is inevitable.

Process

P centric organizations have had enough history to have created a prescriptive process that has incorporated past lessons and should enable great results when the process is followed. Young organizations will almost never have sufficient history to be P centered (though sometimes

complete processes are borrowed from other businesses). Even in mature organizations, this style works best when product development efforts resemble the work that one might find in a manufacturing environment - "make the new one with the same recipe as the last one". A P centric style offers the benefit of clarity; helps prevent some of the same mistakes from recurring and can form a basis for continuous improvement. However, when new product development efforts have many interdependencies in a complex environment or need to be performed somewhat differently than before to create different value, it becomes almost impossible to create a totally prescriptive process. This is when additional elements of M and/or T become vital.

Team

T centric organizations have typically opted against trying to create a totally prescriptive process and don't count on finding super-heroic managers. Instead, they count on the team to figure out what can't be prescribed. Also, the team collectively serves as the project glue instead of just one leader. While this lacks the inherent clarity of M and P centered styles, done well it is far from chaotic. T centric project approaches typically exist with some M and P. The role of M becomes much more that of a conductor and team builder to ensure that the team forms and develops to create synergy. Team members are no longer just puzzle pieces; they also play a role where they view part of their job as ensuring overall project success. Typically, when projects are large, a multi-disciplinary subset of the staff will be considered the top "project team". When working well, this offers the advantages of increased overall project management capacity and capability, as well as the ability to figure out how to get things done where the process could not prescribe it. On the downside, creating teams that can operate in this capacity is an investment both in terms of the overhead of forming and maintaining a synergistic team, and the additional project level responsibilities spread across those on the team. Simply calling a group working on a project a "team" doesn't offer any synergy. The hard work of investing to obtain synergy may require new leadership skills. For simple projects, those investments are often not warranted. For larger, more complex efforts, it may be the only approach (in combination with leadership and some process) that can work well.

Summary

There are advantages and disadvantages to M, P and T centric styles for organizing product development efforts. M or P centered styles can be effective for focused, straightforward work. P can even be effective if work is complex but always very similar. Most product development organizations I've seen have projects that are complex and are doing things new enough that their M or P centric approaches gate their ability to perform. Many of them had never considered the T dimension as a way to improve their performance. Moving to become more T oriented is an investment and often requires leadership to change how they think about roles and accountability. An organization can become more T oriented while maintaining important elements of an M or P style but this system needs to be thoughtfully considered so the contributions of each dimension are well understood. One style will still tend to be dominant. A good indicator of that is to understand where the answer to the question "At a detailed level, how will we do it?" comes from. Is it the manager, a prescriptive process or a team who will figure it out?

Think of M, P, and T as co-existing knobs you can turn over time. It is also possible in one organization to thoughtfully adopt different styles depending on the different efforts you have to undertake. If your company has a product development style in place just because it's the way it's been done in the past, then developing the capability to consider what style is optimal to get the next thing done can be a real advantage. A style shift may enhance your capability to enable much more product development execution success than you currently enjoy.