

Global Project Strategy (011) (603) 862-3374

New Product Development Projects: What's the role of the Project Manager?

"When a product development project fails, fingers start pointing and anyone involved in the project not only can be blamed but will be blamed."

New product development projects have a specific and clear goal: to develop a product that will sell in the marketplace, and contribute to the bottom line of the income statement.

It can be argued that project managers should not be concerned with the eventual success or failure of the product once it is introduced into the marketplace. Isn't their job is simply to plan, execute and control the steps necessary to deliver the project on time and on budget? If it fails, shouldn't the blame be placed the marketing department?

However, the reality is that when a product development project fails, fingers start pointing in every direction and the project manager is a convenient target.

Lets look at some colossal failures. Smith and Wesson, known for fine firearms, developed a mountain bike; It failed. What about the Ford Edsel in 1957; only 64,000 were sold. Then Clairol developed "Touch of Yogurt" shampoo; no one wanted to wash their hair in yogurt. How about Life Savers soda: consumers thought it would taste like candy; it too flopped. And the list goes on.

Many of these flops were so predictable, but the project went on. Where were the project managers?

So, while at one level it makes no sense for a project manager to focus on the market, at another level it makes all the sense in the world. Project managers are part of the team and as such must be willing to look at the big picture and address market issues.

When a project fails, some of the blame will be directed toward them and the failure certainly won't do their career any good.

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Changing Your Management Style

We all develop our own project management style and for most of us this style evolved as we experienced success and failure. For most of us, that style doesn't change much; it is recognizable throughout the project life cycle.

But the stages in a life cycle vary considerably and depending on the project it might be useful to adapt one's

management style to the demands brought on during each stage in the cycle.

For example it might appropriate to be under-confident when planning a project. Questions are asked, and a collaborative environment dominates. Later, during the execution stage, it may be more appropriate to express confidence and assume more control over

the project team.

The reason that adaptation is so important is because many managers may develop a dominant style that is aggressive, controlling and confident. But that very style can also be their downfall. The same risk occurs when the dominant style is accommodative and passive.