Professionals shun heroic endeavour

TWO-WEEK SHUTDOWNS HAD SLIPPED TO A MONTH OR WORSE. AS ANALYSTS AND INVESTORS REACTED TO SURPRISE EARNINGS ADJUSTMENTS, MARKET CAP WAS ERODING FAST.

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This major drilling contractor's 'turn-around' projects entailed a large volume of maintenance, repair and recertification work. These are complex undertakings, not because of the novelty or technical difficulty aspects of the work but rather the number of interfaces that need managing.

And, of course, with the rigs are 'out of service' for the duration, the time pressure to get the plant and equipment back to producing and earning means they are tightly coupled projects. Our client had to tighten things up. And fast.

When 'can do' fails

The company exuded a 'can do' culture, where no challenge was too much. During normal operations that were tightly controlled in an environment of mature systems and protocols, this iron self-belief was desirable. They were a well-oiled machine where safety and professionalism shone through.

The trouble was their ad hoc approach to projects, which was rudimentary. Teams were constantly 'fighting fires' from self-reliant and poorly organised silos. As a consequence, they were operating beyond their failure boundaries, especially their level of required acceptable performance and workload failure boundary. This in turn made them cross the financial failure boundary.

Teams, however, were convinced they were doing what was necessary to deliver—flying in the face of adversity in a set of coveralls—not realizing their Herculean efforts were in fact jeopardizing their projects. Inconsistencies often led to overworked and demoralized crews playing the blame game when the inevitable failures came to pass. Project managers were unaware their project outcomes were directly impacting the organization's corporate risk profile.

True, they had enjoyed some successes which became etched into people's memories and fed the 'can do' myth. But the sheer will needed to get there—and the mental exhaustion at the end—were airbrushed out of the story. Such is the nature of 'heroic endeavour' on projects.

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We needed to help the team develop an approach to better manage and control these projects. The goal was reduced turnaround times and more predicable outcomes—in short, doing things in less time with no nasty surprises.

Wholesale transformational change was out. Our client wanted results, and fast. Nonetheless, the plan was to run a pilot project across 11 differently configured facilities within a year to prove the approach worked.

Choosing professional endeavour

We needed to understand two aspects. First, what they were currently doing. And second, what should they do differently to achieve the management directive.

After an initial audit, we set about mapping the resilience they would need to reliably deliver each turnaround project. We standardized approaches wherever it made sense, setting in place methods, tools and techniques to allow the context and environment of each project to be better understood and prepared for.

We wound back the starting clock to a point where threats could be identified and properly mitigated. This also gave them time to consider opportunities and exploit them. With each pilot project, the lead-time (and cost) was shaved back, and our client's teams eventually delivered the two-week turnaround target.

So what?

As noted, a 'can do' culture has positive aspects we didn't want them to lose. While the specific context of each turnaround was baked into their planning, we harnessed their natural cultural heroic tendency through a flexible risk-based approach that scanned for unpredictable risks and acted quickly to avert trouble. Our client could therefore feel more certain of securing their project's outcomes—and their reputation.

The two-week time savings ranged from $2-5m relative to the earnings of each facility. Over 11 facilities, this was an order of magnitude of approximately $30m/per year, and on a rollout basis across all their facilities of $90m/year. Based on a share-price estimate from the time, this new predictability of project outcome was in the region of hundreds of millions of market capital protected.

Avoiding 'heroic endeavour'

The goal of every project team should be to attain and maintain professional endeavour. Too often, though, companies reward behaviour that appears to go 'above and beyond'. Doing so should only be a last resort and not the de facto culture.

'Heroic' and 'professional' endeavour are two ends of a spectrum. You'll recognize the traits.

Paradoxically, heroic endeavour can deliver projects. The risk is that teams get used to crossing the point of operation beyond the 'workload failure' boundary and the boundary of 'required acceptable performance'

That danger zone makes the organization more susceptible to having an accident or other significant undesirable event that will impact its reputation. On projects, early signs are delays or disruptions to progress and/or productivity. When this happens, the organization tends to overspend in an attempt to recover the situation—and not always successfully. While we all want to be heroes, such a culture is immature and, ultimately, counterproductive.

HEROIC ENDEAVOUR		PROFESSIONAL ENDEAVOUR
Reliant on resource-driven solutions	*vs*	*Project risk and management mature*
Ad hoc approach		Fully integrated approach
Self-reliant		Well-organized
Autocratic management		Efficient collaboration
Overburdened with work		Deals with issues in a timely manner
Poorly organized		Good situation management
'Firefighting' as normal		Mindful of potential hazards
Not 'big picture' aware		Keeps the big picture in mind