



Accelerated learning for Project management? The results are in.

First posted on LinkedIn June 22 2015 by Lia DiBello Ph.D.

In a previous post (June 8) I mentioned some of our early research on what differentiated superstar project managers from the merely professionally qualified and described our new product to accelerate expertise in project management.

1. Keep their eyes on the goal; businesses engage in major projects for a reason; they believe that a particular project will add value to the company or contribute to its strategy for success. Successful projects must deliver these promised business benefits.
2. Create high performing teams, not teams of high performers
3. Manage stakeholders well, communicating well and having the stakeholders best interests in mind.
4. Overcome major challenges or even make them into opportunities for improving the project.

We have been conducting research on our newest product, (described in my June 14 post) a “world” in which teams can rehearse complex projects in the context of a company strategy to see if there is accelerated skill development. Why a rehearsal? It was also clear from our research that the single common factor contributing to very high skill was experience with trial and error, or learning through failing. Our product is a way to get this experience without having to learn through failure in real life, without the considerable financial and professional risks of failure.

The results are in from the first pilot, which involved five teams running a major project “inworld” over several weeks. In summary, all the teams achieved an increase in their skill normally seen with 3 years of project management leadership experience with complex projects. Two teams achieved a skill level normally seen with 5 years of experience leading major projects. This is remarkable considering that all participants were relative novices. There was no in depth assessment conducted since the purpose of the pilot was to test usability and determine what level of complexity is appropriate. However, none of the participants are professional project managers, have any extensive experience on project teams or have ever met in real life.

How did they do? Results of the trial with 23 participants

The students were all enrolled in an Online MBA program. None of them had ever physically met before. The exercise was a requirement for a graduate level course in project management. The students were charged with running a fictitious company, AgriBetes, an agricultural company that produces an innovative agricultural product for a breakthrough diabetes medication. All were relative novices in project management.

WTRI staff played the role of Stakeholders. The “story” of the Agribetes Company and all the internal memos were accessible inworld, but can also be viewed at <http://wmissildine.wix.com/agribetes>.

Working within a \$480 million budget over a 4 year timeline, the students oversaw the growing, processing, shipping and activation cycles of the agricultural and distribution processes. Their basic priorities were to meet demand for the product, staying within budget and loan facility payments while managing risks and adverse events as they came up. To meet these goals, they had to develop a Project Plan, Communications Plan, Work Breakdown Structure and Risk Management Plan. They also had to meet with stakeholders, communicate strategies, and submit progress reports and project assessments on a weekly basis. All activities in the exercise matched the Project Management Institute’s PMBOK Guide.

Timeline

The trial ran two hours a week for 9 weeks. The first week was an orientation session. For the following 8 weeks the students were immersed in running AgriBetes. By design, students went through the full project start to finish twice, Round 1 they started without a project plan. Round 2 they were able to develop a project plan beforehand and implement it. The 8 weeks were broken down in the following structure

Week 0: Orientation

Weeks 1-3: Round 1: Running the project

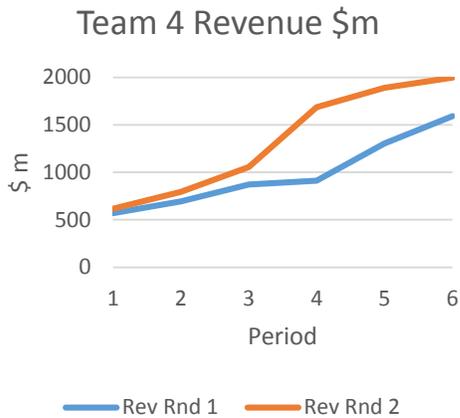
Week 4: Developing a project plan for Round 2

Weeks 5-7: Round 2: Running the project

Week 8: Debrief and Feedback

There are many results to analyze; the sim collects data on every decision and calculates the financial consequences. Gross revenue results are show here. Below are the teams’ Revenue Performance in the exercise over the 6 periods, Rounds 1 and 2. As can be seen, each team achieved a modest incline in revenues in the first “round”. However, they did not achieve profitability. On the second try,

revenues were significant enough to generate profits and repay the loans. More important, the business benefits were realized and the company was able to expand its processing facilities beyond those planned in the original project. All teams discovered an opportunity for significant growth for the company if they changed the scope of the project and could sell it to stakeholders. Three of the teams actually did negotiate this expansion and executed on it.



One of the teams meeting inworld to present their plan to stakeholders



Period: 4
Minute: 20
Group: Dev

A team member checking the crops for drought, bugs or other problems



Period: 1
Minute: 5
Group: Team-2

The team plans the first shipment of the product after making some changes in the growing process.

PACKAGING		Current Inventory	Order Inventory
Ship Departing in: 35 Minutes		From Warehouse: 0	At Port: 0
On Order: 0	Ready to Ship: 5		
On Hold: 0			



The teams can see their progress against goals on “live” charts in the teamroom



The combine harvesting crops with the shipping dock and container ship in the background.