

No Quick Fixes in Pharma PM

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No Quick Fixes in Pharma PM

Karen Klein (April 13, 2006)

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Project managers working in the pharmaceutical industry face high stakes every day. As such, they need an education that familiarizes them with a professional body of knowledge but also instills the confidence to implement case-by-case solutions based on creative thinking, says Fernando Portes, an affiliate professor at Stevens Institute of Technology.

Fernando Portes, who has worked for 17 years for Fortune 100 pharmaceutical and medical device corporations, has recently begun teaching a new class, "Introductory Project Management for the Pharmaceutical Industry," for the graduate-level pharmaceutical programs at Howe School of Technology Management at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J. The Howe School, the largest school of technology management in the United States, is ranked top five in technology management and accredited by the Project Management Institute. Stevens offers two pharmaceutical graduate degrees, and The Howe School's new project management offering for the pharmaceutical industry is well placed in New Jersey, the capital of the U.S. pharmaceutical industry.

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Portes, who also is a principal at consultancy Best Project Management, is adamant that his students, most of whom work in pharmaceuticals already, absorb the fundamentals of project management and then approach each project individually and with creativity. Not a fan of the "cookbook approach," Portes believes that too many cooks are spoiling the broth in project management's educational kitchen. He discussed his theories about training and learning recently with *ProjectsAtWork*.

You don't believe in teaching your students a standard formula they can use when approaching all the projects they manage. Why not?

All projects, by definition, are unique. There's not a single project that's exactly the same as any other. Having a project manager who follows a template on every project sets up that project for failure. Studies have shown that 72 percent of IT projects in the U.S. — across all industries — are not executed on time, don't come in on budget or fail to meet their own requirement. Almost a quarter of those — 23 percent — are cancelled during execution or never completed at all.

This is bad enough if you're manufacturing toys, or paper clips. But when this happens in a pharmaceutical firm, there are unique complications. The FDA can pull a license and subject the firm to regulatory scruples at any time. When a company is making life-saving drugs, one can see how executing projects successfully to spec is extremely important.

What's your approach to teaching project managers?

We use case studies, where we present actual examples from the industry and ask the students to evaluate what they would do if they were the project manager in the situation. There's not a single test that relies on multiple choice or true-false questions. They all require creative thinking. To pass the class, they have to understand what they're doing and they have to be able to articulate it in their own words.

Never do I teach students to use a template approach to managing projects. In fact, I'm highly critical of the idea that a project manager can implement a 10-point technique or follow a template to project management success.

And yet a lot of those templates exist.

Right. You don't have to look far to find handbooks, workshops and seminars that claim to have a foolproof procedure for successful project management. And it's very easy to see why they're popular. Why would a student put himself or herself through a formal master's program when they could go to Las Vegas for three days and learn the 10-point technique? How can graduate schools compete with SinCity and something that simple?

It sounds like you're a skeptic when it comes to the boilerplate approach.

I tell you, there is no such thing as a successful cookbook approach to project management. And I have the feeling that a lot of the 72 percent of failed projects that we discussed already, fail because their project managers were relying on one of those approaches. One of the books I reference in class is called "Fad Surfing in the Boardroom," written by Eileen Shapiro in 1995. She goes through a whole litany of management fads that have gone terribly wrong over the years.

In case after case, over a long period of time, we've seen that templates and cookbook approaches that encourage people to leave their minds somewhere else and follow the latest groove in project management just lead to a lot of problems.

If project managers don't rely on a template approach, how should they approach their challenges on the job?

I like to make an analogy between project managers and doctors. When you're sick and you go to the doctor, you don't see him or her pull out a book and look in it to figure out what's going on with you. That's because a doctor is trained to look at all the facts independently and make an independent judgment. He has become an expert in a body of knowledge that goes back 200 or 300 years. The same goes for lawyers.

But project management hasn't been around that long.

No. Project management started sometime during the 1960s. So, by all accounts it's only 40 or 50 years old. But there are fundamentals that apply, and a body of knowledge that needs to be applied creatively. It's the unstructured application of that body of knowledge that makes a project successful. I'd like to think that by the end of the class, my students will have developed a professional approach and not be a slave to any template.

Do you think all project managers should get graduate degrees in the field?

Let's put it this way: If one wants to be a doctor and prescribe meds, one needs to go to medical school and pass the state requirements needed to get a license. It's the same with other professionals, like lawyers and accountants. If doctors and lawyers are required to master a certain body of knowledge, there's no reason project managers should be any different. They should have to prove they have that knowledge. The PMP is a great starting tool toward professionalism in project management.

Does mentoring help project managers become more confident about using their knowledge and experience to get projects completed on time and on budget?

Yes, it absolutely does help. And sponsorship is great, too, when a project manager can get

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someone in the organization who has power on his or her side. A sponsor can help the project manager solve conflicts and procure resources. And that's the way a good project gets off the ground and keeps going to the finish.

You use the works of Peter Morris in your course. Why?

I believe Dr. Morris has clarified very well the success in project management in his books, "The Anatomy of Major Projects" and "The Management of Project." This gentleman from Oxford details the failures of project management. He believes we won't be respected as a profession if we continue to have such a high failure rate. And I agree.

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