



## Approaches to localization PM



**T**ina: Establishing a PM culture unlocks team potential.

My first exposure to PM came years ago in the publishing industry, as we tackled the monumental task of converting from hot-type printing to electronic printing. We ultimately succeeded, but it took many more hours of effort and coordination than I ever could have thought appropriate. After transitioning to the translation/localization industry, I found that the complexities of PM were only multiplying as I gained experience.

In getting to know other project managers in the industry, I learned that I was in the majority for having had little formal training. We were churning and burning ourselves out in an effort to keep projects under control, monitor what was afoot, and try to learn from our mistakes. I also realized over time that many of my clients had become successful by adopting a structured approach to PM for their own work, which set me on a course of study and ultimately certification in the PMI approach.

I recognized that many of the techniques put forward by PMI were far too complex and time consuming for the average translation project, but it occurred to me that there were plenty of techniques that would be useful for our teams doing production, editing and translation. That realization, along with

*Tina Cargile and Erin Vang had never met each other when they began collaborating on a presentation for the Translation World conference in Montreal in March 2008. While working out their game plan together, they found that their views both converged and diverged, and it soon became apparent that the challenge would not be how to fill the hour but how to pare down their many ideas to fit into the hour.*

*Both are seasoned project managers and Project Management Professionals (PMPs), certified by the Project Management Institute (PMI); both have music in their career histories; both rely on caffeine to get through days that are too long and too busy; and that's about all they have in common. Tina works in sales for a localization vendor, and Erin works in R&D for a software company. Their professional responsibilities could not be more different, yet both are considered localization project managers (LPMs)! They decided to compare their perspectives on the many facets of localization project management (PM).*

my mounting frustrations from using my "hub of the wheel" top-down approach, led eventually to my reaching the following conclusion: Traditional PM tools and techniques can work, even in our industry. However, traditional PM structure, with its centralized, top-down approach, produces little of benefit. Instead of greater productivity, we get a baffling array of plans and graphs that are meaningless to the diverse needs of stakeholders in our industry.

I propose that we find the middle ground. By letting go of the centralized control but teaching PM knowledge, tools and techniques to more stakeholders, we can empower them to manage their part of the process more effectively. Basic PM techniques help all of us reach the benchmarks of our particular specialty.

As Erin and I stressed in our debate in Montreal, context is everything. Readers who have attended industry events or read

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*MultiLingual* and other publications are aware of the diversity of structures and processes in the vendor side of our industry. Some companies have in-house translators, others outsource most of their work, and still others, like my company, employ a hybrid. Between my arena and Erin's on the client side, the challenges are even more disparate.

We have clients, translators and partners worldwide, in virtually every time zone. The challenges inherent in creating communication plans alone can be daunting. Making smart use of technology and allowing virtual teams to work autonomously keep us out of the "all-nighter" business and allow our PM team to stay lean and mean. The "mean" part becomes most evident when I'm requesting a scope change for the third time. We have hundreds of projects in process at any given time, and we have a combination of routine work that fits into our defined workflow system and more customized work that demands a creative, hands-on project manager. We struggle to define and manage myriad constraints, and our list goes way beyond the usual game of Time-Cost-Quality-Scope-Risk whack-a-mole.

Another benefit of learning traditional PM is that it gives us a common language with our clients who "speak PMI." Both as a project manager and in sales, I'm process-oriented and try to get as much information as I can about my clients' internal (sometimes infernal) processes, and having a shared language makes syncing up our processes that much easier.

Keep your company's structure and needs in mind when determining which techniques to adopt. Equip yourself with whichever tools you can handle and need the most, and help your stakeholders learn how to navigate them and thrive with less pain. But don't box yourself or your stakeholders in. There are many approaches to PM, and the body of knowledge, whether sanctioned by PMI or not, continues to evolve.

If you're starting at zero, for heaven's sakes learn some PM basics! Don't reinvent the wheel. PM will help you get rolling and stay organized.

**E**rin: *Traditional PM isn't suited to our industry; facilitative leadership is what really unlocks team potential.*

Like Tina, I started learning PM by managing some localization projects, getting really frustrated, inventing lots of wheels, and taking a lot longer to figure out basic tools than I care to admit. Believing there had to be a better way, I set out to learn PM properly, but the more I learned, the worse I got at doing it and the less I liked my job.

I went to PM conferences, I read books, I went through PMP training and certification, and I never stopped thinking, "Yeah, right. As if I would ever get away with any of this with my team!" There was just no way that any software developers I've ever worked with would put up with that kind of bureaucracy or allow their creativity to be hampered by committing to detailed plans. But I kept trying.

Then I went to a class on facilitation, where ideas about how to serve groups by being neutral on the content while owning the group process sounded great, but once again I was thinking, "Yeah, right." How could an LPM be neutral on the content? If

an LPM doesn't ride herd on every detail and make most of the decisions, disaster follows!

That's when I had my epiphany. Where I was going wrong was by trying to be in control of things. In practice — especially in client-side localization PM — we're often the only people in our organizations who care about and understand localization well enough to make decent decisions, so we end up taking charge. But in theory, a project manager is supposed to serve stakeholders, get decisions from them, and generally run things according to guidelines set by them. Somehow I needed to get my stakeholders to take control.

I found some possible answers in facilitative leadership, which is all about sharing control and optimizing processes to achieve fluidly evolving goals. I decided to give it a try. I didn't have much to lose. I hated my job and my team hated me. It's not as if I could make anything worse. So one day I abruptly let go of all control. I announced at the beginning of a much-dreaded project review meeting that I was going to be neutral about the projects and just serve the group. If anyone caught me showing opinions or trying to take charge of anything, he or she should call me on it.

It worked. In the space of two hours the team went from avoiding structure to asking me for more structure. They took responsibility for the project's problems, they started listening to each other and collaborating, and they proved me wrong about them. They were a good, talented team who wanted to work together better. They'd just had a lousy project manager.

I've never looked back. My teams and I are all a lot happier. My stakeholders are making educated decisions. My groups are making plans, committing to them, and sticking to their commitments. They're raising red flags to me. When I stopped trying to control things, they stepped up.

Facilitative leadership is all about guiding your groups to work better together. It puts people and communication ahead of process, empowering diverse kinds of players to learn from each other, to evolve process improvements, to discover innovation opportunities, and, most importantly, to design and build group agreements, commitments, and plans.

When you succeed at that — when you get the right agreements and commitments up front and when you enable the people in your group to work together well — your group can succeed no matter how lousy you are at traditional PM.

Bottom line: if people are the key to your effort, then I think facilitative leadership is the key to your success.

For all we might talk about the promise and benefits of technology in this industry, the challenging and inspiring fact is that the most important work is done by people, now and in the foreseeable future. This is why it is crucial for LPMs to maximize facilitative leadership abilities, to bridge the cultural, technical and stylistic gaps among the many participants, and to resolve wisely the inevitable conflicts among technical issues, market needs and resource constraints.

As Tina argues, it's all a matter of proportion. PM has its place, and I use some of the basic techniques such as Gantt scheduling and budget spreadsheets all the time. If I could get my team to adhere to a responsibility assignment matrix, I'd be thrilled. I just think all those tools are primitive compared to facilitative leadership, which adapts to and exploits the best part of working in localization: the fascinating people who do it. **M**