

Project Ownership – Put your name on the plane

Have you ever wondered why military aircraft have names stenciled on their side? The short answer is that it's the name of the dedicated maintenance crew chief responsible for ensuring the plane is operationally ready for flight. The deeper answer is a concept of full ownership. If the plane is broken and can't fly, then the name is a public reminder of who is working to fix it. Military leaders learn the importance of ownership early in their career, and those lessons can be applied to every PMO in corporate America.

All PMO's understand the importance of assigning names to projects. However, it might take more than just assigning projects to ensure your team truly takes ownership. Try these tips to increase the level of ownership on your team.

Detail what ownership means

As a former Air Force pilot, I would sign my name on the crew orders before every flight. The Air Force had regulations which detailed exactly what responsibility I was assuming by signing my name to that form. If you have PMO standards, make sure there is a section overviewing what it means to own a project. If you don't have a set of standards, take the time to ensure your project managers know what is expected with ownership. In addition, your team will be more likely to tell you they are running out of bandwidth because they have clear expectations of owning a project.

Ensure names stay on the project

Like the airplane with the maintenance crew chief's name stenciled on its side, ensure your project managers have their names associated with their projects. Once a project is owned, the name must stay on the project regardless of who is getting status. Full ownership means project managers get the good and bad credit. If your project gets briefed to the CIO every month, do everything you can to have the project manager's name next to the project. The military doesn't cover up the names on the plane when a General is walking the flight line, you shouldn't shield the names either.

Full owners vs status owners

There is a difference between taking full ownership of the project versus owning the status of the project. The best way to distinguish the two is the presence of action. A red stoplight chart, or a planned missed milestone, is going to happen on a project, just like a plane is going to have maintenance problems. The key distinction of ownership is the action required to bring the project back in-line. Full owners come with a problem and an action plan, while status owners only communicate a problem. It is incumbent on the PMO manager to ensure the standards of ownership are upheld and enforced.

The military has understood this concept for hundreds of years and it's engrained in how we lead our teams. Think of your portfolio of projects like a fleet of aircraft and make sure every plane has a name stenciled on the side.