Don’t Boil the Ocean (When Creating a PMO)

While some people may not have heard the term “boil the ocean,” most have heard of the KISS principle, most notably coined by the U.S. Navy in 1960 as “keep it simple, stupid.” The idea was don’t over-complicate things unnecessarily. Keep your approach and your methods simple. Makes sense to me, I’m all about simple is better!

I say, “Don’t boil the ocean” or even sometimes if we really want to take on a big effort, “We don’t need to boil the ocean. Just put one pot on the stove at a time.” Now, many people use the term boil the ocean to mean, trying to do something that is impossible. You can’t boil the ocean, silly!

OK, fine. But I don’t really mind taking on the impossible. In fact, if you know me, you may know about my nonprofit Project Management for Change, where we live in the world of making the impossible possible. We do it regularly through our service to the nonprofit community. As an aside, we run these big events with all volunteers to help further the high-impact and mission critical objectives of the nonprofits in our communities using our Project Management skills and have been doing it in ways that “everyone” said was impossible. To that,
we said nonsense and have been going on to change the world, one project at a time, ever since. I encourage you to check out our work if you are interested in being high impact through Project Management.

OK, back to the point of this article. I don’t mind taking on the impossible. I don’t really believe in the word can’t and think that there is always away to make something work. I don’t get scared with big projects or complicated initiatives. I think it’s all great if we believe the return on investment is there and the cause/mission/objective is a worthy one. In fact, many of the projects we are faced with running or PMOs we are trying to create feel like we are attempting the impossible, but we gotta do them. What I don’t like, and feel is setting yourself up for failure is taking on too much, too fast. When we attempt to “boil the ocean,” we are allowing ourselves to get carried away in a big effort that is doomed from the start.

Why is that?

Because big things are really, hard to do well.

What do I mean?

Let’s say you are building a PMO (but you can insert any big and complex project here – building a PMO is a project). You decide you want to build out templates, tools, processes, standards for the organization to follow, portfolio management and governance, a staff of project/program managers, and maybe even a coaching and training group to further the awareness and knowledge of project/program management in your organization.

What’s wrong with that? Nothing. Unless you try to do it all at once. Trust me here. I’ve tried that. It doesn’t work.

Here’s why. When you start building a PMO, you can get “thanksgiving eyes” like I have in the past and try to serve all the needs, of all your stakeholders, all at once. Think about it. You’ve been given this new role and you have so many different business groups that you are trying to get to engage with your PMO, as you build credibility. On top of that, if you have been taught that the customer is always right, you have to say yes to all their different needs, right? Wrong.
If you say yes to everything and try to start building it all at once, a few things will happen.

1) You will take too long to have impact and show value. The business leaders you serve are all watching you to see if you are going to get this right, if you are going to be successful. They are testing you. Even the ones that like you are still waiting to see how you do with this. Because people have what I think is an ever-decreasing attention span, PMOs (and their leaders) do not have the luxury of waiting 2 years to meet the intended objectives, which are presumably to further the business and have a positive impact. If you take too long to start showing impact and a return on their investment, you are likely to find business leaders that get what I refer to as “something shiny syndrome” and move on to the next idea they think will help them get their objectives accomplished. Your window is short here to show value. Don’t squander your time by building big things first.

2) You will likely take in too many conflicting sources of guidance. I have had the pleasure of working in organizations that truly valued relationships OVER productivity. (Yes, they told me that.) So, I HAD to get input and feedback from every major leader in the company, so they could all “put their stamp” on the PMO I was building, giving it their blessing, telling me how it should be built and run, and what they needed from the PMO. Well, that lead to a ton of conflicting data and needs I had to try to address and, of course, everyone’s needs were all number one priority. Ugh. I felt like I had no choice but to say, “Yes, we can do that!” They called it collaboration, but I called it insanity. At least it was driving me to the brink of insanity. It’s a no-win situation when everyone’s opinions count and count equally.

3) You will lose credibility. You begin by saying yes to some things and then a few more and on top of that, you have people making up their own ideas about what you should do, developing their own expectations, and even speaking on your behalf about what you will accomplish. You aren’t even aware of all the expectations running around out there about what your PMO will do. Heck, for some, it’s here to save the world, for others it won’t ever work, and then others have that laundry list of things it will solve for them. Some of those things on their list might not even be on your list, but you won’t even know it! You are failing before you ever start!

4) Big is complicated and messy. Now, notice I didn’t say impossible, but complicated and messy, for sure. It’s just harder to do big complicated things. The harder and more complex something is, the more risks associated with the process, the bigger the issues you are likely to face, the more it costs to do, the more people you must get involved and on and on. Why make it hard when it doesn’t have to be?
5) You could get it wrong. What if what you think the PMO should do is not actually what the organization needs? Yeah, I know, they told you they needed that, but it turns out they didn’t need that, but they needed this instead. You could spend months or years building something that it turns out isn’t really going to get the return on investment or help the organization have the impact it needs to have, and all that time is now gone.

There are many other reasons that boiling the ocean isn’t such a great idea, but I think you get the point.

So, what do you do?

Just put one pot on the stove to boil at a time.

By starting with something simple, you may find out that you didn’t need the whole ocean to begin with OR at the very least, you can at least get some wins early.

1) Prioritize. It’s ok to get input from the entirety of your stakeholder group, but then you must prioritize the work and services that your team is going to take on. Start with the services that you think will yield the highest “happy factor” for your business leaders, whether that’s providing coaching services to PMs all over the organization, setting up some basic templates, or finally giving them a basic view into all the projects in the company.

2) Set expectations. In order to avoid losing credibility before you ever have a chance to be successful, once you have prioritized, be clear about what services you are going to provide, when you will provide them, and then provide detailed “this is how it will work” explanations to your stakeholders. People will fill in the blanks with their own definitions and ideas of what your PMO will do, what the services should be, and how they should operate in the absence of information. Don’t allow that. Be clear about who, what, when, where, how and why you are doing what you are doing, so they know what to expect from you.

3) Build a WBS (and make it a project). Make the big not so big by breaking down the body of work into pieces that you can accomplish in a very short period. Then, put it in a schedule and manage it like you would any other project. In fact, you should be the sponsor, as the PMO leader and have a PM specifically assigned to the “building the PMO” project. That allows you to be the barrier remover and ultimately accountable for the outcomes and success. You can also use the ultimate business leader that championed the PMO as your sponsor if that makes the most sense politically in your organization to get the support you need (and encourage sustained engagement). Just
make sure to look at our blog posts on sponsor management to get ideas for making that work!

4) **Show wins early.** The faster you can solve a problem for your business leaders, the faster your credibility rises as a solution to the company’s problems, not simply overhead. Wins give you more time and space to create more wins and then more.

5) **Think Agile.** Iterate. Start simple and develop pilot programs or services for your stakeholders. Call an initial roll out of a service a “pilot program” and let a group of stakeholders be a part of helping you design the best way to provide that service. People don’t expect to see perfection in a pilot and they know that they must be a part of the solution improvement process. Perfect. Those that sign up to be the early adopters are your change agents you will use as champions later to bring on other business leaders and groups. The fact that you included them in the pilot and incorporated their feedback means they will “own” the solution with you. The perfect champions and advocates for your PMO!

6) **Repeat these steps for every service and deliverable you create.** You don’t need to have a very complicated portfolio management process to start, just give them a list of their projects so they can see what the heck is going on. You don’t have to have 10 PMs on the team to start managing some of the initiatives, just get a few good ones to build credibility. You don’t have to take on every business unit in the company day one, just pilot one or two business areas at a time to learn the ropes and build out your approach. You get the idea.

I hope this gives you a few ideas to maintain your sanity and make the daunting task of starting a PMO (or running any change effort) a little less overwhelming. Oh, and if you need more, write to us! We respond to all our messages and make sure that none of you are left not knowing where to get help. We must stick together out there! :)

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Warmly,

Laura Barnard

Founder & CEO, PMO Strategies