

Caveat

DTSI is a staff augmentation company in San Antonio, Texas who I started working with in November of 2008. DTSI achieved maturity level 2 for staff augmentation against the CMMI for Development in March of 2009. DTSI achieved maturity level 3 against the CMMI for Development in March of 2010. DTSI is comprised of a most excellent group of people.

–John Ryskowski

Preamble

<Unsolicited email from Greg Wicketts of DTSI, San Antonio to John Ryskowski of JFR Consulting>

“I’m happy to report that our ML3 processes are alive and well; in fact, almost too well! We’ve really gotten into the discipline of process definition adherence and everyone recognizes the benefits of this (correct) way of doing business. I don’t think we’ve had a meeting where we didn’t identify a process or a product (form, report, etc.) for improvement.”

“We’ve not missed a monthly DTSI Project Management Review (DPMR), Project Metric and Analysis Review (PMAR), Change Control Board (CCB) or Process Improvement Board (PIB) and have convened two extremely beneficial Lessons Learned Meetings.”

Greg to his management- An unsolicited email we sent to our lead appraiser 6 months following our ML3, he emailed back and mentioned that others may want to hear our story.

Introduction

DTSI’s ML3 journey was introspective. Initially, like many small companies, we were concerned that the resources necessary to accomplish this goal would be too burdensome; however, senior management determined that successful completion of this journey would provide an important discriminator for us during competition with other small businesses for future work. It is rather spectacular that the majority of language you are about to read did not exist in our organization 2 years ago. Not only have we adopted new and better behaviors, but additional language to go with it.

Maturity Level 2 First

First and foremost, we were fortunate to have a Senior Management Team that understood the scope of this effort and who wanted to get this right. They understood that Maturity Level 2 was an integral part of the overall goal; that forcing level three onto our relatively immature organization would not yield the benefits desired of this effort.

Secondly, much of the work for this effort fell at the division level and specifically on the division manager. During the level 2 and 3 journey, the division manager’s workload increased dramatically; not only because he acquired the process lead’s workload during

this time, but also because his division manager role was a key part of every process we defined. Although still difficult, accomplishing level 2 before pursuing level 3 allowed us to methodically ease into the journey as opposed to being hurled into the fray.

Thirdly, working with a consultant who understood our business model proved invaluable. His guidance to level 2 and then on to level 3 gave us the confidence that we could accomplish this goal. Perhaps, most importantly, he knew that our agility was our greatest asset.

“Tools”—Project Lifecycle, Templates and Project Operating Instruction

The creation of our Project Lifecycle was, by far, the most important tool we developed during our journey. Once we captured our project phases and the activities associated with each phase, the process definition became the (relatively) easy part.

Templates that included instructions on how to complete them were effectively implemented and used immediately.

We were able to capture all company policies, programs and procedures into one master “Project Operating Instruction.”

These three documents, when taken as a whole, provide an elegant “one-stop-shop” for all project participants.

DAR and Risk Register

The introduction of decision analysis and resolution discipline through the use of established criteria has become extremely beneficial at critical decision points (e.g, bid/no-bid, renew/close project and selection of key personnel).

We adopted a methodology for identification, ranking (using an “Organizational Risk Score” (Project Size X Risk Score)), tracking and reporting risks. Our Risk Register is validated and reported on monthly.

The introduction of discipline into these two areas has been very beneficial and helped provide focus on what we, as a company, have defined as decision and risk criteria.

Efficient Meetings

We convene a lot of meetings: Project Planning meetings, monthly Project Management Reviews (DPMRs), monthly Project Metric Analysis and Reviews (PMARs), monthly Configuration Control Boards (CCBs), monthly Process Improvement Boards (PIBs), Lessons Learned meetings and others. Ensuring that an agenda is produced and approved in advance by division managers and our CEO (when appropriate) has greatly increased our meeting efficiency.

Additionally, the introduction of “Pre-planning Meetings,” convened prior to our Customer Kick-off Meetings, has proven to be extremely beneficial. Reviewing lessons learned from previous projects and maintaining a “Standard List of Requirements Elicitation Questions” helps to ensure customer requirements are as clearly defined as possible.

Strategic Planning and Training

Aligning our business objectives with a balanced scorecard strategy was instrumental in the development of our Strategic Information Technology Plan and Strategic Training Plan. During our annual meeting, all requests for hardware and software purchases and teammate training are evaluated to determine if the requests are congruent with our long-range plans.

Process Improvement Board (PIB)

Monthly, we convene a PIB to review, evaluate and approve/disapprove all Process Improvement Requests (PIR) submitted during the previous month. Requests may range from changing verbiage on a form to instituting a new evaluation process. The division managers and CEO attend this meeting so decisions are immediately rendered.

Process improvement is really what our entire two-plus year effort was about and our senior management ensures submitting suggestions to improve our organization are easy: send an e-mail to the Process Lead. All suggestions are staffed to the appropriate stakeholders and meet the PIB for review and discussion.

Summary

The importance of the introduction of, and adherence to, process discipline and standardization cannot be overemphasized. The benefits of our CMMI maturity levels 2 and 3 journey are evidenced daily; the entire management team, under the direct guidance of our senior leadership, now thinks and operates “differently” exhibiting higher efficiency and clarity of purpose.

In light of this emphasis, our newest challenge is process improvement management itself. Although we are a small company, we have never had small ideas and this journey unharnessed a methodology that allows all ideas the opportunity to get out on the track and compete for limited resources. Moreover, the winners are chosen not because they are the fastest horse in the race but because they offer DTISI the most efficient lane toward the accomplishment of its strategic goals. To continue the metaphor, we have begun a race with ourselves and are enjoying the run.

By: Greg Wicketts, DTISI, San Antonio, Texas