Accountability: The Chicken and the Pig

The story goes that a chicken and a pig were walking down the road chatting about starting a restaurant. The chicken suggested a breakfast place that served bacon and eggs. The pig wasn't too thrilled at the idea because his commitment to the enterprise was more serious than the chicken's. "You must make a regular contribution," says the pig. "But for me, it's a total commitment."

I'm not sure exactly when Robert Kelly posed the question: "Can Project Managers Really Be Held Accountable?" on the #pmchat group on Linkedin, but I noticed it last week and believe he's asked us all a very valid question. "I get that a project manager is responsible for cost, budget, etc., etc., etc. But I am thinking about this from a general business perspective and their perception of the value of PM in the enterprise," he says.

He brings up some great points about changing requirements and timelines and how sometimes providing business leaders with the value they are looking for is like trying to hit a moving target (my words not Robert's). Challenging at best.

He asks the question, "[H]ow do you measure success? Does the standard PMI answers/criteria work for you? When Executives in the corner office put a date on a calendar without any discovery work, is it a project failure if you don't hit the date? If you stay within budget, schedule, and meet all of the requirements of functionality/quality and they simply change their mind, is that failure?"

These are questions that anyone managing a project probably faces almost daily. And, although the definition of success is way to subjective for my taste and never as straightforward as it should be, I do believe project managers should be accountable for what happens within the team. I think one of the the things accountability gives the project manager is a mandate to makes sure requirements and a definition of success are well-established before the project even begins.

Most of the projects my team is responsible for are scheduled to start and finish within a calendar quarter. It's my job to make sure that every initiative is scoped appropriately so that we can accomplish it within that time frame. What's more, everyone on the team has skin in the game. There is compensation tied to our ability to execute on time and on spec. I'm often asking myself, as other "distractions" which have the potential of hurting the performance of my project goals appear, "How much of my bonus do I want to bet on this?"

I'm empowered, nay expected, to push back on anything that comes down the pipeline that might derail my team. And if requirements change or other priorities change the scope of my project, I'm expected to make sure the definition of success changes along with it. If I don't, the onus is mine—I'm accountable.

I don't think accountability is bad. In fact, I think accountability and ownership help everyone on the team perform at a higher level.

Not every project leader is able to enjoy the rewards of a successfully completed project. Maybe they should. I know that I am very motivated to see my projects come to a successful completion because I'm "invested" in their success—and so is the rest of the team. I'm also a fan of delivering value at shorter intervals because it helps facilitate this kind of environment.

After all, organizations do projects to produce value. Sometimes it's easy to forget that.

Short of making the pig's commitment, have any of you worked in a project environment where you had some skin in the game? Did that make a difference in team performance? Was it a positive thing?