

Developing and Improving Project Management Skills

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What is project management? One usually thinks of a project as a group of milestones or phases, activities, or tasks that support an effort to accomplish something. And one usually thinks of management as the process of planning, organizing, controlling and measuring something.

What does project management entail? There are several components.

- Planning is probably the most critical of all management processes and the one that gets the least amount of our time. Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, advises "beginning with the end in mind."¹
- Organizing is necessary to make progress in accomplishing anything in some orderly fashion. It is the act of recognizing what things are contingent on other things and/or are prerequisites to other things or are essential.
- Controlling is critical if we are to use our limited resources wisely. Items such as time, money, people, equipment, hardware, software, space, and supplies are all necessary to accomplish some goal.
- Measuring is necessary in order to determine if we accomplished the goal or met the target. Are we efficient? Are we productive? Are we doing a good job or a bad one? What is the outcome? Is it what we wanted it to be? It's been said, "If you can't plan it, you can't do it. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it."

Who uses project management? Nearly everyone, to some degree. People plan their days, their weeks, their vacations, and their budgets and probably keep a simple project management form known as the "to do" list. Any process or means used to track tasks or efforts toward accomplishing a goal could be considered project management in its simplest form.

Why is project management used? It is necessary to track or measure the progress we have achieved toward a goal we wish to accomplish. We use project management to aid us in maximizing and optimizing our resources to accomplish our goals.

How much time does project management take? Not much. Probably more time is wasted as a consequence of lack of project management than is spent to plan adequately, organize, control effectively, and measure appropriately.

How long should project management be used? As long as there are things to do, places to go, or people to see, some form of project management is needed.

Why is project management important? It causes us to map out a course of action or project/work plans. As a result, it causes us to think more thoroughly than if we had tried to complete a project in a haphazard way. The project manager considers and identifies all the milestones or phases involved in the completion of the project, identifies the activities that are necessary to accomplish the milestones, and finally identifies the tasks and subtasks necessary to complete an activity with regard to any and all resources required to accomplish the project in its entirety.

The Road to Better Project Management Skills

Find a project plan that fits your personal style of management and/or project management needs. It can be as simple as creating templates, forms, and spreadsheets to track project tasks or purchasing tool kits available on the market.

Recognize that your stakeholders are vital to your project. A stakeholder can be defined as a person or entity who has a "stake" to receive benefit or "risk" to suffer loss from a system, process, or project or who has influence or authority to affect a system, process, or project. We also have identified seven types of stakeholders, including:

1. Customer -- a recipient of a product or service
2. Participant -- a contributor to the progress of a system, process, or project
3. Management -- a person or entity who has the authority to affect a system, process, or project
4. Vendor -- a provider of a product or service
5. Consultant -- a provider of advice or direction who has influence to affect a system, process, or project
6. Partner -- one who shares in the benefit received or the loss suffered from a system, process, or project
7. Champion -- one who serves as the proponent or supporter of a process, project, or system

Identify key stakeholders at the beginning of your project. It could mean the difference between a successful project and a failed one. Obtain "buy-in" from stakeholders involved in the project; recognize who is in the driver's seat. It should be the customer. Who has the power and the control? Is it the project manager or the customer? Negotiation is key.

Estimate personnel hours and time. It is important not to over- or underestimate human resources. You'll also need to monitor and track assignments to people with various competencies and skill sets.

Obtain customer and/or stakeholder "sign-offs" at the completion of a major milestone or phase. This is critical because you need consensus from the team to recognize completion of this milestone; otherwise, how do you know when you are through? You also want the team to recognize a "mini-success" with the completion of each major milestone.

Identify a process for routing additions to the project or project plan. Who has authority to add something to the plan? And at what cost? Will this mean a delay in meeting the time line or target completion date? Will additional resources or funds be necessary? What is the impact analysis?

Recognize that there are two types of managers -- managers of people and managers of projects. Managers of people manage people and their work assignments. Managers of projects manage projects and the people necessary to complete a project. How are these two different? The manager of people usually has the authority to hire, fire, counsel, and evaluate the people who report to them and monitor their productivity and work assignments, whereas the manager of projects must manage a project from beginning to end, including human resources. However, project managers do not usually have the authority to hire, fire, counsel, and evaluate people. Because of this, a project manager has a tremendous challenge to motivate the people assigned to him or her.

Recognize how people are motivated. People are either motivated away from pain or motivated toward pleasure. Think about it. . .when your alarm first awakens you in the morning, do you jump out of bed because you can't wait to go play golf (motivated toward pleasure), or do you jump out of bed because you start to think about all the things you must do that day and, for you, pleasure can't come until your work is done (motivated away from pain)? As a project manager, knowing how people are motivated can help you motivate them to do their part of the work plan or project plan.

Recognize the "red flags." A project manager must be a great negotiator in order to get the most positive outcomes or experiences out of the project and the project team. You, as a project manager, must constantly deal with a variety of human behaviors and attitudes and direct them toward the attributes you want to see. By providing the team with a healthy, positive atmosphere that is nonthreatening and keeping communications open, you can accomplish a great deal. By constantly rewarding the team and encouraging them, you accomplish your goal -- the successful completion of a project. Reward, recognition, and empowerment are vital when working with human resources. Author Ken Blanchard writes about empowerment: "That power already lies within people so that empowerment is a function of release rather than control leadership."²

Complete the process loop. You must obtain feedback from all stakeholders involved in the project for process improvement -- which results in ongoing training. At the end of a project, always review the lessons learned with input from the entire project team. This can be invaluable, like a debriefing session, but will serve as a quick run-down of how and where improvements can be made in managing future projects.

Recognize that project management is not quite cookbook methodology, nor is it rocket science. Each project plan must be "tweaked" to meet the unique needs and expectations of the stakeholders involved in the project as well as adjusting to what limited resources one has to work with.

Dos and Don'ts

Do manage the issues. Keep an issues list. The project manager or team leader should rank these issues by severity (1s, 2s, and 3s). An internal automated tracking system that tracks measurements can be a great motivator to the project team members. The project manager might choose to post daily the "good, bad, and ugly." The things that are of higher priority or need to be focused on are ranked as 1s and are listed with team names assigned to them. This list is posted, and the entire team focuses on these high-priority issues. Once all of the 1s are closed out, the issues remaining are reprioritized and assigned to resources. The project manager must determine what resources are required for each issue and go after those resources. One way is to ask for additional resources. If this cannot be accomplished, then the project manager must reassign existing task teams.

Do estimate your projects. Estimating your projects with less than a 5 percent variance is difficult in the beginning. Trying to determine what resources you will need with what skill sets or competencies is also tough. But remember too that whatever the task involved, accomplishing it is 90 percent attitude and only 10 percent skill. Time estimations are also difficult in the beginning, but the more you do them, the better you become at them.

A great incentive is to measure the project manager's estimations and projections by tying them to evaluation and merit. For instance, if a project manager's estimated variance was only 10 percent off the mark, the merit increase would be 90 percent of the possible. This type of incentive can help the project manager learn to stay focused and, as a result, more effectively estimate projects.

Do communicate with the project team. At key points and throughout the project, give the team members recognition for the tough tasks completed. Talk about what's been good, what the team learned, what the team could have done better. With this arena of open communications, you continue to "tweak" the process. Also, talk about where the team is going, where it is, and where it's been. This will give the team a sense of accomplishment and pride.

More Ways to Learn

To continue to improve or develop project management skills, take project management courses at local colleges, universities, or technical schools. Inquire if one-day seminars are offered. Check with training and consulting companies that may offer courses that meet a variety of needs. Inquire if they offer computer-based training courses. Look for self-paced study programs that offer project management modules.

Recognize that most organizations are trying to do more with less. These organizations either are in, have been in, or are planning the process of rightsizing, downsizing, consolidating, merging, aligning, reorganizing, or transforming into the organizations of tomorrow. So work smarter, not harder. Use the tools available to you. By developing or improving project management skills, you meet more goals and are more successful at things you wish to accomplish, both for yourself and for your organization.

Notes

1. Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.
2. Blanchard, Ken, John P. Carlos, and Alan Randolph. *Empowerment Takes More than a Minute*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996.

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