Project Management 101. Skills for Leading and Working in Teams, pt. 1

Save to myBoK

by Barbara A. Doll, PhD, PMP

Part 1 of 4

As new technology spreads through healthcare organizations, traditional walls that divided departments are coming down. HIM professionals increasingly find themselves collaborating with IT and clinical colleagues to select, design, implement, test, and train staff on new hardware and software. New systems often require teams that review and rewrite policies, procedures, and standards.

Serving effectively on the project teams that tackle these assignments requires particular skills. This column is the first in a four-part series that introduces the fundamentals of project management. It will define and describe projects, their phases, and the skills, tools, and techniques of project management, helping you participate in your organization's projects either as a project manager or a member of a project team.

What Is a Project?

To begin, a project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to produce a definite product or service. Projects are:

- Temporary: they have a defined beginning and end
- Unique: they concern something new and therefore involve uncertainty and change
- Specially staffed: they require staffing, often from multiple areas of the organization
- Sponsored: they report to a specific client or sponsor

A project can be as simple as updating a reporting document to meet a new government regulation or as complex as selecting and implementing an electronic health record system.

The projects an organization undertakes represent its investment in the future. Collectively, they are called a project portfolio. Projects in the portfolio are generally chosen based on three criteria: alignment, profitability, and balance. Alignment means that a project supports the organization's strategic goals and objectives and furthers its ability to compete. *Profitability* is a project's expected return, a measure to ensure that the most profitable projects are chosen. *Balanced* projects meet the organization's needs—such as maintaining infrastructure—while achieving desired levels of risk and growth.

The Project Manager's Role

Project management applies specialized knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet project requirements. The concept sounds simple, but the execution rarely is. In 2001 just 28 percent of projects were completed on time, within budget, and with the required functionality—not very impressive results.[1] Many organizations and industries are struggling to understand and apply good project management to their businesses.

Project managers require skills similar to those of a general manager. First they must possess management skills, called hard skills, such as product and technical knowledge and knowledge of project management tools and techniques. They also require leadership skills, called soft skills, such as the ability to:

- Work with people from various backgrounds, disciplines, and knowledge levels and translate between them
- Provide clear and compelling visions, alternatives, solutions, and plans
- Build interpersonal relationships, trust, and respect that motivate and develop teamwork

- Effectively manage conflict and emotional or reactive responses
- Use influence to get things done

The project manager is responsible for managing the problems, conflicts, and challenges that arise during the project. Often, courage is required to bring the parties together and face difficult decisions or unrealistic expectations. For example, in many projects the sponsor imposes time, resource, or cost expectations that are found to be unrealistic as the project progresses. In this case it is the project manager's responsibility to research and present alternatives that best meet the sponsor's goals. If a time constraint cannot be met, the project manager might suggest bringing in an additional resource or postponing a feature of the project in a noncritical area.

It is not enough for the project manager in this example to simply tell the sponsor that the time or cost constraint is unrealistic. Doing so is asking the sponsor to do the project manager's job. Being prepared, focusing on the facts without blame or emotion, and suggesting intelligent solutions is how a project manager should manage problems that arise in a project.

The Project Life Cycle

Organizations require standards or guidelines that establish good project management. Generally projects follow a standard process, such as a project life cycle, which describe the phases of a typical project and the associated procedures and documentation. Phases vary by project and industry, but general ones include concept, development, implementation, and close-out.

Next Steps
Coming in part 2:
1. Starting projects
2. The nine knowledge areas

Note

1. The Standish Group. "Extreme Chaos." 2001. Available online at www.standishgroup.com/sample_research/PDFpages/extreme_chaos.pdf.

Barbara A. Doll (j.doll@charter.net) is an ad-hoc seminar leader at the University of Wisconsin School of Business, Executive Education.

Article citation:
Doll, Barbara A. "Project Management 101: Skills for Leading and Working in Teams, Part 1." *Journal of AHIMA* 76, no.1 (January 2005): 50.

Driving the Power of Knowledge