

WHITEPAPER:

People in Project Management



Introduction

When it comes to project management, failure doesn't have to be an option. That said, even within well-run organizations, with outstanding talent and a deep well of resources, projects may lose their momentum or go off the rails entirely—with costly results.

A study by PwC, for example, found that only 2.5% of the 10,640 projects (from 200 companies in 30 countries) they surveyed were successfully completed.¹ In IT, project failure represents a loss of \$50 billion to \$150 billion per year in the United States alone.²

Yes, some projects may fail—but with the right “people management,” you can mitigate the root causes and create a project win-rate that will make you (and more importantly, your projects' stakeholders) proud.

There are many project management tools available—from SaaS applications to a myriad of frameworks and methodologies—and they can help people stay organized. However, with so many gadgets and tools, it can be easy to lose sight of the actual people bringing the project to life. With a solid understanding of how the people in your organization operate, you can go from managing projects to leading them.

¹ Gallup. (2012, February 7). The Cost of Bad Project Management. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/152429/cost-bad-project-management.aspx>

² Gallup, 2012

Leading a project requires a number of skills that have less to do with deadlines and milestones than communication, problem-solving and conflict resolution.

This document explores how project managers can empower key collaborators in any project to mitigate roadblocks and reach milestones successfully.

Constraints Inform Every Project

TAKE THE TIME TO UNDERSTAND THREE BASIC CONSTRAINTS COMMON TO ALL PROJECTS—NO MATTER THE SIZE AND NO MATTER THE INDUSTRY



Resources:
The tools and budget at-hand



Scope:
The ultimate goal for the project



Schedule:
The time in which a project must be completed

These restrictions will provide a set of clear parameters to guide your work and determine a project's key deliverables.

With a clear picture of constraints, coupled with an understanding of how the project team members work, you can plan for contingencies. For example, if you know that your lead coder or best designer works more effectively at night, outside of business hours, you can plan the schedule and allocate resources accordingly.



THAT'S A VERY SPECIFIC EXAMPLE, BUT MORE BROADLY, THERE ARE TWO MAIN GROUPS OF PEOPLE FOR WHOM YOU NEED TO CONSIDER:



Project stakeholders:

These are the people who set the goals, scope and schedule, and rely on the projects' success to move entire strategic initiatives forward.



The people doing the work:

This is your team. These are the individuals for whom your project plan needs to be built. Ultimately, these are the people who will take the project to the finish line.



Before you begin putting a plan together, you'll want to know as much about these two groups, and their expectations and abilities, as you can. These key collaborators all have roles to play, and here are some helpful questions to help gain insights about each group:

STAKEHOLDERS

- Have stakeholders provided clear achievable goals?
- Have they allocated adequate resources, budget, and time to reasonably complete the project?
- To what extent do stakeholders have reasonable expectations about the success and likely outcomes of a given project?

YOUR TEAM

- What is the team's current and future work-load?
- What resources do they need to reasonably complete the project within the given budget and timeline?
- Are there any personal or professional considerations among team members that may benefit or hinder the project?
- Do specific team members have specialized skills that might be particularly useful?
- Do team members have personal life considerations (planned time-off, family obligations, for example) that might take them out of the project for a time?
- How well do team members work together?
- To what extent have the project's expectations been clearly articulated to the team?
- Are there adequate lines of communication to troubleshoot potential roadblocks?



Knowing the answers to these questions before work begins will give you a head-start when the project kicks off.

Being a Leader

Once a project does begin, the knowledge you've gained about your project stakeholders and team will make your role as the project leader easier. Using insights to develop plans and considerations requires essential leadership skills.

COMMUNICATION

Your job as a project leader will succeed on your abilities as a communicator. More than simply relaying information, it's your responsibility to listen to your people and stakeholders, provide constructive feedback, and ensure that there is no ambiguity when it comes to plans and expectations.

HERE ARE SOME BASIC RULES OF THUMB TO FACILITATE PRODUCTIVE COMMUNICATION:

- Provide clear, concise and constructive instructions and feedback
- Foster an environment that encourages open communication within the team, with you and with stakeholders
- Understand and clearly convey what's working and not working—and how to make the most out of either one
- Discuss potential negative feedback objectively, rationally and constructively—separate from emotional spheres

MOTIVATION

You're not a taskmaster. But it is imperative that you give your team the motivation they need to push through rough patches in the project. That means not only providing positive encouragement, but also addressing potential sources of discord. You don't have to be an unwavering cheerleader, but you do have to work to recognize when someone on your team either needs a boost or a reality-check.

HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Recognize successes as often as the effort put into a task with less-than optimal results
- Empower team members to take the initiative when appropriate
- Proactively recognize and remediate potential trouble-makers
- Provide ample opportunity to discuss performance
- Check in with yourself ensure that you're as motivated as your team



RESOLVING CONFLICT

Conflict can arise at any time during a project. . Even in well established teams, the pressure of a given project may fray nerves, and lead to disruptive conflict. If you can spot the signs of a brewing conflict early, it'll be much easier to prevent it from boiling over into a project-ending squabble.



HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES TO RESOLVING CONFLICT:

- Do your prep work. Put plans in place for potential conflicts that may arise
- In case of unforeseen conflict, work as quickly as possible to identify the source of the disagreement
- Plan your approach to solving conflict—based on the variables, do you approach it head-on? Avoid it? Accept it and move on? Only you can know what's best for your team

MANAGING CHANGE

If your plans fall into place without any surprises, consider yourself very lucky. The fact is that you'll likely have to face a few curve balls thrown your way. Adapting to changes effectively can make all the difference—both to the health of the project and your own sanity.



KEEP THE FOLLOWING IN MIND:

- There is no way to plan for and predict every variable in a given project
- Keep yourself up-to-date with information, data, or news that could potentially affect the project's ongoing work or outcomes
- Challenge your team to develop contingencies based on their own unique abilities or specific functional areas
- As always, communicate transparently, frequently and objectively

Don't Forget The People

Understanding the people for whom a project's outcome is critical (stakeholders), as well as the people working to see it through, is as essential to a successful project as effective resource management. Leading a successful project requires empathy and communication skills as much as meticulous planning. It's true that some projects may fail because of variables well beyond your control, but when you master the people-side of project management, you'll give all the others a very healthy chance of success.

SMU Continuing & Professional Education

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