

Project Management: Success is in the Fundamentals

The thought of project management conjures up thoughts of complex project schedules, detailed algorithms and complicated processes to ensure success. Though managing large projects is, indeed, a complicated process it is often made more so by project managers who do not take care of the basic fundamentals first.

This may seem overly simplistic but after 25 years of reviewing and rescuing projects it is obvious to me that lack of attention to the basics is one of the most common reasons for project failure. The following are a few of the key fundamentals project managers should focus on:

Communication

The first basic is communication with team members, project sponsor, business users, operations management and senior management. Though this may seem obvious it is the number one area of problems in many projects. Project managers must establish a communication plan for their internal team as well as for external stakeholders. This plan should document the key project messages and establish frequency and methods of communication.

Formal meetings should have an agenda with clear delineation of topic responsibilities, time allotted and input required. Immediately afterwards minutes should be prepared and distributed so all participants have a record of the discussions and a clear understanding of their responsibilities. Minutes need not record every detail, instead they should focus on the key information items and action items including a short description of the action required, who will do it and when it will be completed.

Informal meetings should be documented by e-mail summarizing the key points, action items, responsibility and timing. These minutes should be distributed to all affected – likely more than those who participated in the informal interaction.

Schedule, Cost and Quality

Controlling the schedule, cost and quality of the project is another area requiring attention. In many projects immense efforts go into the development and management of an “automated” project scheduling system. These tools are extremely helpful but can also be a “black hole” sucking in valuable project resources. I’ve reviewed projects that had such a detailed and complicated project plan and schedule it required a week to update, and left team members and managers unsure of where the project really stood.

A good project plan with appropriate milestones and control points is critical. A project manager must be able to use this schedule to communicate with the project sponsor, business users and senior management in a method that is easily understood by all. Where appropriate, the project manager should be able to drill down into the detail to track project activities at a lower level of granularity.

Managing the cost of the project is equally problematic. Some project managers rely on the automated tools to manage the costs. In some cases this works well though with some of the more complicated financial systems this can be cumbersome.

Most project managers focus on trying to deliver their projects on-time and on-budget. This is a good thing – except when they ignore the quality side of the equation. Good project managers need to constantly monitor quality to ensure the project will still be able to deliver the expected business value. Don’t forget this element!

Effectively controlling the schedule, cost and quality involves managing the overall scope of the project. This is another area that represents a challenge. Every project should have a clear statement of the project vision – what is the business expecting from this project, how does it fit into the overall corporate strategic plan and how will the success of the project be gauged at completion. Unfortunately a clear vision is not always documented. If the project manager or sponsor can not articulate the project vision or have different visions then the chances of success are greatly diminished.

Scope Management

Once a vision is established it is critical to clearly define the scope of the project. It is highly likely that the project scope may change during the project. If it does then the change control process must be performed to ensure the business understands the impact of the change. If scope changes are approved then the project manager has their revised set of marching orders and can proceed. Don't try to let minor scope changes slip by without going through the scope management process – its amazing how quickly these little changes will turn into something that could severely threaten your project.

Leadership

Project management is by definition about managing. However when it comes to team members, leadership should be your focus. The project manager must effectively lead his/her team to achieve the common project goal. This involves providing direction (which many project managers are skilled at) and also listening to the experts in your team (which many project managers are not so good at). Often teams are made up of people from across and outside the organization. The project manager should take steps to bring them together in a way that causes people to want to work together for the duration of the project. A lot will be asked of your team members so treat them with respect, have some fun and help them learn how to work effectively with each other.

Summary

The practice of managing projects involves dealing with many challenging issues and channeling all efforts towards a common project goal. Though the above steps may seem overly simplistic our experience has shown that an exceptional job on the basic fundamentals of project management will significantly increase the probability of success of your project.

Need More Information?

Please call (604) 294-2292 or e-mail info@KLR.com