People: The Key to Successful Project Management

While Gantt charts, timelines, budgets, resource constraints, quality challenges, performance measures, and other tools are important, they are neither meaningful nor effective without people.

I WAS ASKED TO LEAD A TEAM TO DEVELOP and implement project management principles, techniques, and tools specifically for research and development, an area often not accustomed to the rigors of formal project management. I had been on many R&D project teams as well as product and process commercialization teams, once serving on 12 project teams at the same time.

Having had little formal project management training, I made an appointment with Charles Brod, chair of the Union Carbide Corp. (UCC) Project Management Council who was well-respected for his project management expertise. I knew I could benefit from Charles's insight.

In preparation for my visit, I did some research and made a list of questions to ask Charles. As I entered his office at the appointed time, I said, "Charles, I know that people are important in project management ..." Before I could finish my sentence, he interrupted, "You stop right there! People aren't just important in project management, people are project management!"

I sat there stunned for a few seconds as my brain rapidly processed what Charles had said: "People are project management!" As my mind raced through my many experiences in the many projects I had worked on, I knew most instantly that what Charles had just said was not only true, but it was the verbalization of one of the most important principles of project management. In comparison to that statement, little else mattered in that interview.

The following sections discuss some of the many types of interactions project managers have with others involved in their projects.

Interacting with project team members

There are no leaders without followers. Leadership and management are all about working with people.

Much like a music conductor leads an orchestra to play a concert, the project manager leads the project team to accomplish the project objectives (/). The project team,

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like an orchestra, must be unified and in tune (aligned) as its members follow their leader.

To achieve harmony, the team must want to follow the leader. This is a vital people-interaction principle. The leader and the team must care enough about each other to make this happen. Project managers can achieve success by:

- when practical, involving the project team in refining the project objectives with the customer
- assuring that the project objectives, constraints and deliverables are clear and are understood by all team members
- always involving the project team in project planning, then ...
- seeking commitment from team members
- genuinely asking for input from team members when challenges arise
- delegating as much as possible to team members, according to each individual’s readiness to accept the added responsibility
- building and developing team members, giving them growth opportunities but not overwhelming them
- minimizing unnecessary bureaucracy whenever feasible
- learning what motivates and inspires each team member
- asking for accountability, while helping team members get the authority and resources they need to carry out their assignments
- working with line management to assure that team members have the most up-to-date tools
- rewarding or disciplining team members sooner, rather than later
- making project meetings and communications valuable so they don’t waste people’s time
- managing conflict quickly and seeking win/win resolutions
- implementing a project communications plan
- keeping accurate and up-to-date project records to minimize miscommunications and unnecessary rework.

Interacting with senior managers

Senior managers ensure that business goals are being achieved. They often act as the intermediary between the customer and key project personnel. They provide essential support and guidance for projects. They frequently act as project sponsors or champions.

A project manager needs to interact with senior managers for many reasons. They often work together to define project objectives and deliverables; to clarify and align business and technical objectives; to clarify company policies and procedures, project scope, project risks, critical success factors, key project priorities or drivers, and tolerances within time, resource and performance constraints; and to finalize and approve the project charter.

It is absolutely essential that effective interaction occur between the project manager and senior managers. If these interactions are not effective, support for the project could wane, misunderstandings will almost surely occur, project objectives and priorities will either be unclear or insufficiently acted upon, and the project team could easily feel it is drifting without a good sense of direction or support.

To improve the effectiveness of these encounters, be

If Only I Had Known ...

Gido and Clements put it this way (1): “It is the people — not the procedures and techniques — that are critical to accomplishing the project objective. Procedures and techniques are merely tools to help people do their jobs.”

As engineers progress in their careers, many become project managers. These engineers are usually highly trained technically and tend to be very analytical. This makes them good technical-problem solvers.

However, engineers rarely receive formal training on effectively leading and managing people. Thus, they could be weak people-problem solvers. Yet, this is exactly what they are expected to do as they move into project management or other management positions.

Pinto and Kharbanda identified several things that new project managers wished they had known (2):

- Conflicts occur as a natural part of team development.
- It is important to know the project stakeholders and their agendas.
- Organizations are political.
- Project management is leader-intensive and requires flexibility.
- Customer satisfaction is essential for project success.
- The project manager must be a motivator, coach, peacemaker and conflict manager.
- The team develops attitudes based on the project manager’s emotions.
- Always ask “what if ...;” don’t be comfortable with the status quo.

Above all, plan, plan, plan!

Project managers have responsibilities, among other things, to: define and clarify objectives; lead and manage; plan; organize; and control, influence and replan. These all involve interactions with people.
honest, maintain integrity, and be respectful. Don’t be afraid to ask for or give clarification or more information as often as is needed. Give and ask for the accurate, whole picture, not just the good news. Be concise in communications, but be clear. Do all you can to prevent surprises. Be sure to thoroughly discuss and understand all important project risks, tolerances and priorities. When discussing concerns, focus on the issues rather than the people. Use senior management to help with conflict and risk management when their help is truly essential. And finally, never backbite your senior managers — it won’t help, and it will probably make things worse.

**Interacting with line managers**

Line managers frequently play a vital role in a project’s success or failure. They may select which individuals in their groups to assign to a given project. In many organizations, the line managers continue to pay those employees’ salaries while they are on the team. This can cause an allegiance preference for the line manager over the project manager if the team member receives mixed signals and must decide which boss to follow.

If the line managers appoint team members to work on the project, they typically retain responsibility for assuring that their people have proper training, monitoring the workload of their people, and often taking care of the administrative needs of their people (payroll, safety certification, annual reviews). They are also usually much more technically knowledgeable than the project manager.

Clearly, line managers can be vital to a project’s success.

Project managers should, in the very early stages of the project, begin communicating with the line managers of those who might be selected to be on the project team. Assure that the project objectives, deliverables, priorities, drivers and tolerances are clear to each line manager who will be providing resources or services. Develop a close working relationship with line managers, because you need their support, advice, wisdom and buy-in. Always keep line managers informed of the project progress, concerns, challenges and needs. Also keep them aware of personnel achievements, performance issues, or needs pertinent to their areas of responsibility. Listen sincerely to the concerns and advice of line managers — if you don’t, you will pay for it. Finally, communicate regularly (5).

**Interacting with others in the company and the general public**

Depending on the project, interaction with the company as a whole or with the general public can range from non-existent to frequent and crucial. Corporate or public perception of you and your project can have the potential to make or break a project. If this applies to you, nurture appropriate interpersonal relationships with all the care you can give.

Learn what major concerns the company or the public is likely to have, and be fully prepared to address them honestly and openly. If you can’t be open because of secrecy agreements or other legal constraints, make that clear.

Always be prepared! Know exactly what is happening on the project. Then plan and practice how to communicate with those concerned. Make sure senior management, the customer and the project team know what you will present, and be sure to obtain their suggestions and support.

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the people with whom you need to communicate. Seek to understand them (6).

Always be ethical in your behavior and in your words. Most importantly, do not lose your cool. It takes many good interactions to make up for a single bad one.

**Interacting with the customer**

The project manager’s interactions with the customer are perhaps the most important of all, and could have the greatest impact on customer satisfaction — the real measure of project success. Perceptions play a major role in project success. The customer usually knows best what it wants at the end of the project. Effective interpersonal communication is necessary to transfer that knowledge to the project manager and team.

Unless the nature of the project prevents it, the project manager and team need intense interaction with the customer as early in the project as possible. This is when the greatest potential to affect the final project outcome exists. Make this happen if possible.

Early interactions between the project manager, team and customer should include developing a very clear understanding of: project objectives; project priorities; time, resource and performance constraints and tolerances; critical success factors; project scope and deliverables; project background and justification; and any key concerns and assumptions.

Lastly, maintain open channels of communication throughout the entire project.

**Interacting with contractors and other service providers**

Flames and Levin recently stated that the outsourcing industry is growing 20% annually, and that those temporary workers sometimes “contribute a greater depth and breadth of experience” (7). The project manager function might even be outsourced. The presence of contractors and other service providers, either as part of the project team or not, presents important challenges.
Remember, as with other key interactions, constant and nurtured communication is absolutely essential. Address any cultural, technological or other barriers that might impede this needed communication.

Don't treat people who are not on the project team as second-class citizens. Value them. Care about them. Seek to understand their perspective. Your efforts will pay big dividends.

When dealing with contractors or others not directly on the team, recordkeeping and communication become even more important to avoid misunderstandings, rework and problems later. Make sure important communications are in writing, then follow up personally to discuss any questions or make clarifications. If changes are needed, put them in writing and get all necessary approvals.

Read all contracts thoroughly and make sure you understand them. If the other party is writing the contract, prepare your own quick draft before you see theirs. This way you will have an idea of what to look for and what questions to ask when you review their contract.

If you are writing the contract, ask the other party what they would like to see in it. Get input from other people who will be working on the project and people who have experience with contracts. Then, have an attorney help you prepare the final contract to avoid problems with issues you might have overlooked. Make sure senior management signs off on whatever the contract says. If you all work together, you are more likely to achieve win/win results.

**People and project success**

Based on a study of approximately 650 projects, Baker, et al. define project success as follows: "If the project meets the technical performance specifications and/or mission to be performed, and if there is a high level of satisfaction concerning the project outcome among key people in the parent organization, key people in the client organization, key people on the project team, and key users or clientele of the project effort, the project is considered an overall success." (8). Notice the vital importance of people interactions and the perceptions of people, in addition to technical performance.

This definition places a large emphasis on perception — "a people feeling." Notice also that schedule and budget are not explicitly stated as part of project success, although they undoubtedly affect perception and feeling. Nonetheless, such a definition certainly exemplifies the tremendous importance of people in measuring and accomplishing successful projects.

**Closing thoughts**

Good people interactions are vital to successful project management and must be carefully nurtured. These interactions permeate essentially every aspect of the project and are also the most time-consuming of the project manager's responsibilities. Because of the importance of people, a project manager needs to learn to sincerely care about each person associated with the project, and nurture these people interactions to achieve success. Charles Brod indeed summarized it well: "People are project management!"

**Literature Cited**


