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Three Steps to Ensure the Success of Your IT Projects

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In so many respects project management seems like it would be fairly straightforward. You identify and gather a group of highly skilled people, clarify your goals and objectives, develop a budget, and create a schedule. What could be easier?

The reality is projects do not always go the way we would like them to. We often find ourselves being asked to do more with less and at a faster pace than ever before. Sometimes we are successful in our efforts despite these negating factors. Other times these factors cannot be overcome and contribute to significantly less than optimal results and even project failure. The following is a list of additional factors that contribute to project failure:

- poor communication
- inadequate planning
- lack of control
- lack of upper management support
- poor risk planning
- lack of end-user support
- missed deadlines
- unrealistic expectations
- complex technological issues

Some causes of project failure are beyond anyone's control, but more often than not, we can take courses of action that will help ensure project success. The following is a list of just some of the factors that lead to project success:

- effective communication
- executive support and organizational commitment
- clear project definition, business objectives, and requirements
- an effective team and support structure
- a practical plan and expectations tailored to fit the project and its team
- clear roles and responsibilities
- the involvement of skilled resources, including experienced project managers
- adequate risk management and quality methods
- integrated change control, including scope, schedule, and cost
- the use of a standard, consistent, and practical project methodology

Achieving success in project management is simply the result of emphasizing the fundamentals. Many key factors contribute to project success, but three of the most basic – stakeholder identification and analysis, effective communication, identifying project requirements, stakeholder expectations, and scope of work.

1. Stakeholder Identification and Analysis

A stakeholder is a person, group of people, department, or organization that may be affected either positively or negatively by the execution or delivery of a project, and any of those who perceive themselves to potentially be affected. Stakeholders may be actively or passively involved with the project, and they can include individuals or groups such as the following:

- project managers
- sponsors
- customers
- end users
- portfolio managers
- program managers
- project management office
- decision makers
- project team members
- functional managers
- senior managers
- other project managers
- business partners
- vendors and contractors
- governmental bodies such as regulatory agencies

These are the people who have a vested interest in the outcome of the project. Identifying stakeholders is especially important during the initial phases of the project, when they can have a great deal of influence. The Project Management Institute's (PMI's) guiding document, the Project Management Body of Knowledge *PMBOK® Guide*, devotes significant attention to project management processes to stakeholders.

As with many aspects of project management, the easiest way for the project management team to identify stakeholders is to ask questions. Here are a few examples of questions to ask:

- Who should be involved in the project?
- Who is already involved in the project?
- Who will make a contribution?
- Who might impact the project?
- Who might seek to influence the project and do they have any contradictory interests?
- Which stakeholders might be in conflict with the projects goals and objectives?
- Who has "bought in" and who has not?
- How does the completed successful project affect them?
- What do they have at stake?
- What is their sphere of influence?
- What do they bring to the table?
- Can the project succeed without them?

Stakeholders may affect or be affected by the project, through a project decision, activity or outcome, or they may simply perceive themselves to be affected by the project's execution. The impact or perceived impact on or of a stakeholder can be either positive or negative in nature.

Most projects have a very large number of stakeholders. Identifying all stakeholders increases the chance of project success. You must secure and document relevant information about their interests, interdependencies, influences, potential involvement, and probable impact on the project definition, execution, and final results. After obtaining this information, classify the stakeholders according to their characteristics. This approach will allow you to focus on key relationships that are critical to project success.¹

Stakeholder Analysis

Stakeholder analysis is the technique of gathering and analyzing information, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to determine who the stakeholders are and whose interest should be taken into account relative to the project. Make sure you identify the interest, expectations, influence, and involvement of various stakeholders relative to the purpose of the project. You might also want to identify stakeholders' alliances that might be used to build partnerships to help ensure project success. Stakeholder analysis involves the following basic actions:

Action 1: Identify all potential stakeholders.

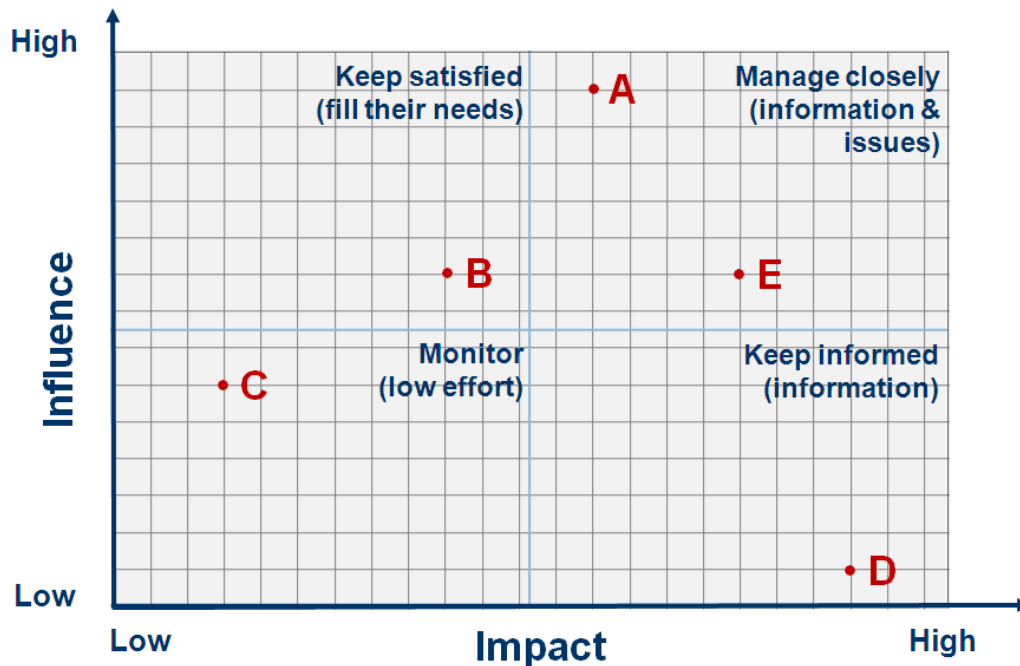
Gather information about them such as the role they might play on the project, the group they are in, what their interest level in the project will be, how their experience and background relates to the project, what they expect out of the project, and how much influence will they be able to exert on the project. Usually key, powerful stakeholders are easy to identify. They are often the ones who have budget and decision-making authority or are in a senior management role. People in this group might include the project sponsor, the project manager, and the primary customers (end users). You can gather and document information by using tools such as interviews and stakeholder registers.

Stakeholder Register						
Project:		Project title here		Project #:	Project # here	
Project Manager:		Project manager name here		Sponsor:	Sponsor name here	
Project Artifacts:		Location of project documents		Updated:	Date of update here	
ID	Stakeholder	Role	Impact	Influence	Needs	Responsibility
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						

Action 2: Identify stakeholders who might have a substantial impact on, or could be supportive of the project.

Classify them so that you can develop a strategy to manage each of these stakeholders. There are different ways to classify stakeholders. Classifications and associated models can include the following:

- **Power/Interest grid:** This shows where stakeholders fall relative to their authority and concern for the project.
- **Power/Influence grid:** This shows where stakeholders fall relative to their authority and involvement.
- **Influence/Interest grid:** This shows where stakeholders fall relative to their involvement and ability to affect change.
- **Salience model:** This shows where stakeholders fall relative to their authority, need for attention, and appropriateness of their involvement.



Action 3: Assess the likely reaction or response of key stakeholders to various situations.
 Develop a plan for how to win their support or mitigate negative impacts.

Managing Engagement and Expectations

The engagement level, needs and expectations of individual stakeholders, along with their tolerance for risk, can influence (or even constitute) the constraints of a project. As such, they need to be managed. This involves communicating and working with all stakeholders to influence their expectations, address their concerns, resolve issues, and encourage appropriate levels of engagement. The project manager's role during includes the following activities:

- **Actively manage the process.** In order to achieve project goals, the project manager should negotiate and influence stakeholder needs to increase the likelihood of project acceptance.
- **Address potential concerns.** The project manager should anticipate problems and address them before they become issues. The risk from such problems needs to be addressed as soon as the potential problems become apparent.
- **Resolve and clarify identified issues.** Identified issues could be resolved by submitting a change request or by accepting that the issue is outside the scope of the project.
- **Appropriate engagement.** The project manager should engage stakeholders throughout the project to obtain and maintain stakeholder commitment to the success of the project.

Managing stakeholder engagement increases the chances that the project will be a success by ensuring that stakeholders understand the project benefits and risks. This understanding allows them to actively support the project and help with risk assessment on project decisions. By anticipating stakeholder reaction to the project, you can be proactive with preventative action to win the support of the stakeholders, or at least minimize their potential negative impacts. The benefits of this process can be summarized as follows:

- increases likelihood of project acceptance
- keeps issues from becoming concerns
- helps stakeholders understand project benefits
- helps stakeholders understand project risks

- limits disruptions during the project
- helps influence stakeholder expectations
- encourages stakeholder participation²

Effective stakeholder engagement depends upon effective project governance. In those cases where a project management office (PMO) exists, the PMO is very likely to provide a governance structure for projects. However, project governance remains an important component of effective stakeholder management even in the absence of a PMO. Project governance structures provide a means of an alignment between the project and the stakeholder objectives. It also enables the alignment of the project's value with the larger organizational business strategies, and gives the project sponsor and project manager a consistent structure for balancing stakeholder objectives and organizational objectives in decision-making.

Simultaneously, the project manager should monitor the effectiveness of their strategies regarding managing the stakeholder's engagement, and make adjustments to their strategies as necessary to sustain appropriate stakeholder relationships.³

2. Effective Communication

How do you manage anyone's expectations? Through communication. It is vitally important that there be a well-defined communication plan tailored to fit the project and the project stakeholders.

Communication is a dynamic process. This is true for both intrapersonal and interpersonal communications. Interpersonal communication is made up of a loop, which is comprised of a sender (the transmitter) and a receiver (the original destination).

For interpersonal communication to be effective, the original sender must take their thought and organize it; put it into clear, simple, precise terms; and then send their message. Before they can send it, the message needs to be encoded correctly for the receiver. What does that mean? It needs to be put into a context so that the receiver can understand it. The receiver needs to be able to decode the message correctly. In other words, the receiver needs to "seek first to understand," as Stephen Covey suggests in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

The receiver simply needs to seek to understand what has been communicated to them, rather than add to or take away from it. They need to avoid "spinning it in their mind" in any manner. The receiver may then choose to respond. The response also needs to be encoded correctly and decoded correctly. All of this means that there are potentially four places where this communication loop can break down and become barriers in the communication process.

But these are not the only barriers. Other common barriers include sound, distance, language, dialect, racial, cultural, physical challenges, and even attitude and interest barriers. For the most part, barriers are external to us and easily get in the way of two parties having open communications.

Filtering can also become an obstacle to effective communication. Unlike external barriers, filters are internal to us. For instance, people often carry baggage from one relationship to another. In other words, you may end up filtering a new communication/conversation based upon an old paradigm. Political filters are great way to illustrate this point. When you think of a politician, you're more likely than not to have very strong opinions about them one way or the other. If I were to name a politician and then began to talk about their attributes or the things I do not like about them, potentially you will filter everything I have said based upon your own unique political filter. Unless you are completely apolitical, you have a political filter.

The problem is when we allow filters to go far enough, they become a huge barrier in the form of a prejudice. A partial list of additional common filter/prejudices includes: cultural, racial, educational, gender, gender preference, monetary, positional (within an organization, e.g., management versus non-management), military versus non-military, and contractor versus employee. In order to enhance communication, it is important to recognize that you, and anyone you are communicating with, may potentially have many filters. Only when we

bring them to the conscious level can we begin to do anything about them. Otherwise they simply remain a barrier.

The information presented so far deals mostly with the “how” of communication. But another common issue has to do with which information needs to be communicated. If the information is too high level, then details will be missed. Project information and the communication plan for it, must be tailored to fit the project and the team doing the work of that project. One component of the discipline of critical thinking is to learn by questioning. The PMI indicates that ninety percent of a project manager’s job is communication however, it is not limited to talking, alone. It includes, listening, reading reports, generating reports, filtering information from one group to another, etc. To do this effectively, you need a well-defined communication management plan. The creation of any plan like this can be broken down into six questions that need to be asked continually: *Who?*, *What?*, *When?*, *Where?*, *How?*, and *Why?*

For example:

- Who needs to be communicated to, and by whom?
- What needs to be communicated?
- When does that need to take place?
- Where does it need to happen?
- How is it going to happen?

And the most important question of all: *Why?*

- Why does it need to happen?
- And why right now?
- Why didn’t we communicate this piece of information a week ago, or why don’t we wait and communicate it two weeks from now?

The communication plan should also address the lines of communication, forms and appropriateness, media and distribution methods, international and virtual teams, and even effective meeting practices.

- **The Lines of Communication.** This address is the number of people or groups who need to be included in project communications.
- **Forms and Appropriateness:** This includes written, both formal and informal, and oral, both formal and informal.
- **Media and Distribution Methods.** This includes paper, email, presentations, Internet, telephone, push, pull, and interactive.
- **International and Virtual Teams.** Project team members are not always located in the same place, especially with global teams or an outsourcing project. Planning approaches and mechanisms for communicating that address issues of cultural differences and increased communication frequency for virtual teams are vital in these situations.
- **Effective Meeting Practices.** This includes a pre-published agenda, clearly defined expectations and responsibilities, preparation, action items, signed owners, and deadlines for all action items, summary or minutes, and follow up.⁴

3. Identifying Project Requirements, Stakeholder Expectations, and Scope of Work

Before beginning your project, make sure you have clarified all goals, objectives, and requirements. Obtaining clarity on what is required and ultimately gaining buy-in from the major stakeholders is crucial. These requirements, along with related goals, objectives, and deliverables, become the scope of work that must be completed and will be refined over the life of your project, but if you do not start with a solid understanding of what you are trying to achieve, you might as well have not begun at all.

Without clarity of what the stakeholders perceive the project to be about and what they expect, achieving success from their point of view will be very difficult, if not impossible. This is why stakeholders must be identified and their expectations analyzed as early in the life of the project as possible.

In order to achieve clarity of the true project requirements and scope of work, as with all aspects that are project related, you need a plan: a plan for requirements, and a plan for scope.

Requirements Management Plan

The requirements management plan describes the approach to documenting, assessing, and managing requirements during the project. The project life cycle significantly influences choices about how to manage requirements. The requirements management plan includes the

- approach to planning, tracking, and reporting, requirements;
- approach to recognizing, analyzing, deciding, tracking, and reporting, changes to requirements;
- way that requirements will be prioritized;
- way that requirements will be measured in the rationale for using those metrics; and
- traceability matrix, including the relationship between the requirements and other project documents.

What causes many errors and can contribute to project failure? Poorly defined requirements do. Many studies indicate this as one of the main issues of project failure. The next question that must be asked then is: *What causes poorly defined requirements?*

- rushing the project (overly-aggressive schedules)
- technical constraints
- many unknowns at project launch (often due to rushing the project and lack of time for planning)
- lack of focus or focusing on the wrong things
- poor planning

Qualifiers for project requirements include those aspects that are as follows: necessary, verifiable, attainable, unambiguous, complete, consistent, traceable, and assumption-free (as much as is possible). A good practice is also to distinguish between the stated requirements and the true requirements of the project. Additionally, just because someone does not state their requirements verbally does not mean they are any less valid for that person or group.

Scope Management Plan

The scope management plan establishes the guidance for how the scope will be defined, validated, and controlled. A go-to scope management plan can be formal or informal. Based on the needs of the project, it should at least provide guidelines for how to

- prepare a detailed scope statement;
- use the detailed scope statement as a basis for creating the work breakdown structure (WBS);
- obtain approval of, and subsequently maintain, the WBS;
- obtain formal acceptance of project deliverables upon completion; and
- detect changes to scope and manage those changes back through the change control process.⁵

One problem often encountered regarding stakeholder requirements is that personal expectations are not openly voiced. Many key stakeholders assume that you know what their expectations are. This does not mean that those expectations are any less valid for that person or group of people. As with all aspects of a project, a proactive approach is needed. As previously stated, the project manager must first identify and seek out potential stakeholders in order to make inquiries about their requirements and expectations. Once identified, discussions can begin as to whether those expectations align with the overall project requirements. When you encounter stakeholders whose expectations are not in alignment with project objectives, you must begin open communication with them as soon as possible. At times these conversations will not be easy. A great resource is Kerry Patterson's book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

Discussions of this nature often turn into informal negotiations. Two short but excellent resources for these type of conversations are William Ury's *Getting Past No: Negotiating with Difficult People* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991) and Fisher, Roger, and Ury's *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

It was once thought a project was successful if it was completed on time, on budget, and with the correct quality intact. While this is still true, in the eyes of stakeholders, there is more to it than that. Before beginning the project, the project manager must ensure that it is based on a solid foundation and that they have buy-in from all key stakeholders. Understanding stakeholder interests and expectations and being aware of how they will align with the true project objectives will often determine whether or not the project is successful, at least in the stakeholders' eyes.

Conclusion

Projects are often complex, made up of a large number of moving pieces, and bring numerous challenges to those involved with them. But, by keeping the three key steps — identification and analysis of project stakeholders; the creation and use of an effective communication plan; and proper identification of project requirements, stakeholder expectations, and accurate decomposition of the scope of work — at the forefront during project planning and execution, the ability to achieve success is greatly enhanced.

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