This chapter is taken from *Business Driven Information Technology: Answers to 100 Critical Questions for Every Manager* by David Laube (ed.) and Ray Zammuto (ed.). It was sponsored by The College of Business at the University of Colorado, Denver. Published September 2003 by Stanford Press.

Each chapter in the book is a response to a question. This chapter answers the question, "***Why is it important to explicitly state the intended business result of an IT project? How should this be done?***" Please note – what is expressed in this chapter is true not only of IT projects, but also of strategic initiatives.

Question 94: What questions does the project sponsor need to ask a project manager?

Wendi Peck

The *executive provider's* challenge (**Q93**) is to keep thinking at a high level, doing deep dives only where necessary.[1] That's a tough challenge in the IT environment where there is constant pressure to excel at the minutiae of technology. The *provider's* response to that challenge must be to keep a short mental checklist of the key factors in project success, *and to keep coming back to it*. The list isn't long:

1. *Project Manager Performance*—Examine the performance of that person. Look for what else could be done or provided to make the project manager successful.
2. *Project Team Dynamics*—Determine if the team members are getting along and focused on the right things.
3. *Project Approach and Outcomes*—Learn the current results, cost, schedule and risks – and possible tradeoffs between those factors.
4. *Client Expectations*—Uncover current client expectations and how to manage them in the face of changing reality. Learn what non-IT issues will make or break the business result of this project, and determine if the executive Client (**Q93**) is attending to those issues.
5. *Stakeholder Commitment*—Determine the most recent stakeholder issues

that need to be resolved or exploited.

Like the circus juggler spinning plates, each of these five areas requires the Provider's on-going attention. The fact that any one factor is proceeding smoothly does not mean that it can be ignored.

The best way for Providers to exploit this mental checklist is to keep scanning its five dimensions as context for incisive questions. Questions are surely one of the executive's most potent tools. Questions direct conversation, focus a discussion without monopolizing it, and can unearth information that might otherwise have been forgotten, hidden, or prettified.

For each of the five factors, no single question is always the right one. Within each factor the questions will change based on the project phase and the circumstance. However, the examples that follow indicate a direction of inquiry that generally works. Notice that every area of inquiry offers the opportunity for Providers to understand what is needed from *them*.

The emphasis here is on communication between the Provider and the project manager. Questions and style of inquiry can be adjusted when the Provider is in conversation with someone else.

Project Manager Performance

One researcher has found a powerful distinction between effective managers and ineffective ones.[2] The effective managers more often engage employees in conversation *about the employee's own performance*. Questions that help the Provider do that with the project manager include:

- How are you feeling about your work on the project?

- What are your biggest challenges right now?
- What are your plans for dealing with those problems?

In addition, the Provider should look for opportunities to assist by asking:

- Is there anything I can do to make your job easier?
- What sort of help do you need from me at this point in the project?

If the project manager paints only rosy pictures, the Provider can ferret out information with the use of hypothetical questions such as:

- I'm glad things are going so well, but if we were to experience a problem, from what direction do you think it might come?

Project Team Dynamics

Some "teams" are teams in name only, without much teamwork evident. To discover the health of the team, the Provider can ask the project manager questions along these lines:

- How clear are team members about their roles and the roles of those around them?
- How well is the team working together?
- Are any problems between team members creating distractions or slowing progress?
- For those resources that are borrowed from functional areas, are you receiving the level of support needed from their supervisors?
- Did all team members attend the last team meeting? If not, why not?
- Are there any team members who seem not to support recent team decisions?
- How is team morale? Has it changed recently? If so, when and why?

- Is the team enforcing its agreed-upon ground rules?
- What can I do to help in this area?

Team work aside, the team may or may not have enough talent or the right kind of talent. The Provider can ask questions such as these to determine resource adequacy:

- Are you satisfied with the capabilities of each of your team members?
- Is each team member meeting your performance expectations? If not, how will it affect the project? What have you already tried to improve performance?
- Are additional or different resources required? If so, help me understand why.

Project Approach and Outcomes

There are many dimensions to the project work itself. Understanding the effectiveness of the project approach, the real status of the work, and whether or not desired outcomes will be achieved requires inquiry into several areas. The following ideas will start the right conversations:

- Project Approach
    - Do you believe our current project approach is still the right one? Why or why not?
    - Were we right about the risks and benefits inherent in this approach? If not, what needs to change?
    - Is the measure of performance we established for this project still appropriate? Achievable? (**Q92**)

- Results To Date—The Provider will benefit from gaining an understanding of a bit of project management esoterica called “earned value.” In a nutshell, it takes the pulse of a project by examining budget, schedule and work achieved in *relationship to each other*, rather than each separately. It isn’t adequate simply to know whether the project is on schedule or within budget. It is better to know:
    - Have we completed the work that needed to be completed by this date in the schedule?
    - Have we spent more or less money completing that work than we planned?
    - It is also helpful to ask:
    - Have you made any financial commitments that aren’t yet reflected in the current project financials?
- Contingency Status
    - Early in the project: What kind of contingency, in time and dollars, are included in this project? (**Q75**, **Q99**)
    - Later on: How much of the contingency is left? Knowing what you now know, is it enough?
- Project Changes
    - Are there any new changes to scope and features that I don’t know about?3
    - If so, what is the potential impact of these changes on schedule and budget?

- Project Cutover
    - What problems do you anticipate with cutover?
    - What are your fall back plans if things go wrong (**Q99**)?

Client Expectations

Especially in IT projects, many people "on the client side" are sometimes called "the client." In reality, there is likely only one executive (or a small handful of executives if the project is being shared across business units) who has the authority to determine required outcomes (**Q93**). That person is the real "Client." Expectations of that person must be managed first; expectations can then be re-set elsewhere, lower down the client organization(s), as necessary. The Provider, not the project manager, should manage client expectations and iron out problems with clients at the executive level.

In this area, some starter questions for the Provider include:

- Do you detect any problems with the executive Client right now? (Problems might include diminished support or participation, discontent with the project team, etc.)
- What inconsistencies are we hearing between what the Client expects and what others in their own organization expect?
- Does the Client's current expected outcome match ours?
- Have there been any requested changes to scope (by anyone in the client organization)? If so, how have those been handled?
- Are your receiving adequate client support from the individuals who have regular interface with the IT project team?

Stakeholder Management

Stakeholders are individuals who will be (or perceive they will be) affected by a project in some way (**Q49**, **Q50**). They are usually also individuals who can either help the project succeed or help it fail. Knowing who these individuals are is critical to project success. Often, the people who can help the most or do the most damage aren't the people with the biggest titles.

One of the key functions of the Provider is to help manage project stakeholders – especially stakeholders for whom positional clout is required. The Provider is in the position to help keep the path cleared so that the project team can be successful. A fair amount of formality in this regard is recommended. Specifically, the Provider and the project manager should meet initially to determine who – of all the stakeholders – represents the critical mass. In other words, determine who the 12 to 15 individuals are who have the ability to make or break the project. This does not mean all other stakeholders are forgotten. Communication and involvement plans need to exist for all stakeholders. However, those individuals in the critical mass (which may change over the life of the project) obviously must receive more one-on-one attention.

The goal here is to get and maintain enough commitment and support from each stakeholder to ensure project success. Not all stakeholders need to have the same level of commitment to the project. Some stakeholders may simply need not to be roadblocks, while others are needed to actually help sell the project. The Provider should work closely with the project manager to determine and manage a strategy appropriate for each. Once stakeholder management strategies are developed, ongoing inquiry might look like this:

- For each stakeholder within the critical mass: Is John Doe's level of commitment where we need it to be at this point in the project? What indicators do you have of this?
- And if not: What can I do to help achieve it?
- Are new stakeholders surfacing that we should be discussing and managing?

Summary

Providers can find themselves awash with project data, but still bereft of information needed for wise strategic control. Meeting that challenge requires frequent, informal conversations with the project manager and others related to the project. The key to success in those conversations is skillful inquiry: use of questions arising from an understanding of the basic factors of project success.

Resources

Web Based Resources

CIO.com: Leadership and Management Research Center.
<http://www.cio.com/research/leadership>.

Articles

Goldfarb, Eric. "The CIO as Coach." CIO.com 15 July 2000. 16 Dec. 2002
<http://www.cio.com/archive/071500_re.html>.

Ross, Jeanne W., and Peter Weill. "Six IT Decisions Your IT People Shouldn't Make."
Harvard Business Review 80.11 (2002): 84-91.

Books

Cleland, David I., and Lewis R. Ireland. Project Management: Strategic Design and

Implementation. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

Fleming, Q. W., and J. M. Koppelman. Earned Value Project Management. 2nd ed. Newtown Square: Project Management Institute, 2000.

Komaki, Judith L. Leadership from an Operant Perspective: People and Organizations. London: Routledge, 1998.

Leeds, D. Smart Questions: The Essential Strategy for Successful Managers. New York: Berkeley Books, 2000.

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[1] A previous question (**Q93**), explains that "the sponsor" can refer to either of two roles: the *executive client* who will benefit from the technology implementation, or the *executive provider* in IT who will provide executive oversight for the IT portion of the project. Here, we will consider questions that can be asked by the Provider, however most of them could just as easily be asked by the Client, as well.

[2] Judith L. Komaki, Leadership from an Operant Perspective: People and Organizations (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[3] If there is an executive steering committee involved in the project (**Q95**), it will also be important for the *provider* to inquire about their knowledge of such changes. Sometimes changes that initially seem small and inconsequential evolve into changes that have huge impact. The *provider* needs to stay in touch with steering board members, maintaining awareness of their issues. That allows the project manager freedom to focus on day-to-day decisions, but prevents undesired scope creep.