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 98: What top ten actions can IT project managers take to increase the likelihood of implementation success?

Wendi Peck & William W. Casey

Most of the answers in the *IT & Implementation* section of this book offer or imply suggestions that project managers will find helpful in ensuring success. Drawing from those ideas and others, here is the top ten list of actions most likely to lead to implementation success.

1. Adopt a proactive mindset.

A significant amount of psychological research has shown that successful people differ from their less successful peers in one overarching way: they see themselves in control of their own success and failure.[1] This is a uniquely beneficial perspective for project managers.

Consider that every project problem contains aspects that the project manager can control as well as plenty that are uncontrollable. The more successful project managers adapt *proactively*; they act on the pieces they control while learning how to prevent the problem next time. The less successful ones waste time whining and blaming, and are quick to point out what someone else should do next time to prevent the problem. In the authors' research, project managers who had previously received training in this area attributed much of their current project—and career—success to their learned ability to adopt a proactive mindset.

2. Establish an effective relationship with the *executive provider.*

Project managers do well to quickly establish a relationship with the *executive provider* (**Q93**), the person ultimately accountable for delivering the project. With this executive "guardian angel" on their side, project managers stand a good chance of avoiding some of the project and organizational pitfalls that can cause failure (**Q88**). The *provider* can often grant the project manager appropriate authorities, help remove roadblocks along the way, expedite trade-off decisions and help manage the politics.

Not all *providers* understand the project side of their jobs as thoroughly as they know the other aspects. A wise project manager creates a conversation to clarify roles, communication protocols, and other mutual expectations.

3. Ask for (and exercise) the necessary managerial authorities.

Project management resembles any other kind of management: one person is on the hook for the performance of others. But somehow, when the word "management" has "project" in front of it, executives forget to confer the standard managerial authorities they otherwise would. Proactive project managers work with their supervisor at the beginning of the project to secure the needed authorities for the life of the project (**Q96**).

4. Define success before the project starts.

Like a politician's promises, fuzzy project goals imply goodies for everyone. But this expediency carries a price. Avoidance of difficult discussions before the project only delays them until after the project—after the opportunities are gone and the money is spent.

The antidote to fuzzy thinking and political pandering is the "measure of performance" (MOP), (**Q92**). The MOP asserts an objective, overarching project result. It states the objective *reason* for the project far better than any statement of scope or list of requirements. In the end, it will be the unambiguous indicator of whether the project achieved what it promised.

A project's MOP (or MOPs, if it is a program) requires the involvement of the *executive provider,* the *executive client* and central stakeholders. The project manager's job is to coordinate those people's efforts until they reach a satisfactory result.

5. Establish a clear, logical structure up-front.

Where a camper pitches a tent usually receives less attention than where that same person chooses to live. Temporary structures just don't receive a lot of consideration. That includes projects.

Because projects are temporary organizations, many receive scant attention to their organizational structure: *who is accountable to whom for what,* plus *their authorities.* The understandable inattention to this detail carries severe costs. In most collapsed projects, unclear or illogical structures helped cause the failure. It is exactly because projects are temporary that their structure demands rigor. Project work affords little chance to get the structure right over time; there isn't any time so it must be done at the beginning.

When working with their supervisor and the *executive provider*, project managers must clarify three critical messages:

1 the desired output for each participant,
2 to whom is each participant accountable and for which output,
3 what positive or negative consequences will accrue to each participant based on his or her project performance.

6. Manage stakeholders with a formal plan.

Stakeholders are individuals or organizations who are affected by (have a stake in) the project. The good news is they can help a project succeed. The bad news is they can completely derail the project. Savvy project managers work with the executives to analyze the organizational landscape, then create, update and manage a stakeholder plan. This means knowing what is needed from each stakeholder for the project to be most successful. Some stakeholders simply need to be kept from creating roadblocks. Others, such as those who will be using the project's deliverables, need to play an active role from start to finish (**Q47**, **Q48**). Caveat: many powerful stakeholders do not posses impressive titles; do not neglect them.

7. Use a project plan and keep it flexible.

There exists a sweet spot between obsessive planning and the unfortunate sequence of Ready-Fire-Aim. Skillful project managers occupy that sweet spot, balancing the necessity for immediate action with the necessity for intelligent action. Successful project managers do not neglect planning, nor are they are slaves to it.

Successful project managers update their plans for two reasons. First, they get smarter as the project proceeds; as unknowns become known, updated plans are better plans. Second, *clients* get smarter; needs, problems, and opportunities all become clearer. Good project managers help craft updated plans that reflect win-win solutions that serve the client's interests without promising the impossible.

8. Create strict project controls before they're needed.

Because most projects don't deliver the original project plan, the project manager must establish mechanisms for controlling change *-up front*. Change causes project failure only if it gets out of control (**Q87**).

Change control comes easiest when its process is documented and agreed upon prior to the need for its use. Often this involves interaction with the project's steering board (**Q95**). Project managers will have much less success if they wait until changes start careening out of control. By then it is too late to put controls in place.

9. Get out from behind the computer screen.

Many managers believe that project management *software* skill equates with project management skill. Yes, good project managers understand their tools and wield them effectively. But a person who can use a hammer isn't necessarily a carpenter and a person who can use project management software isn't necessarily a project manager. Project managers who spend more than 25% of their time hunched over glowing Gantt charts have missed the most important part of the job—communicating with people.

10. Reward good performance and quickly correct bad performance.

Irrespective of designated authorities, every project manager can influence performance. They can achieve this influence through their ability to reward the performance they want and correct the performance they don't want. Successful managers of any kind do three things (1) set clear expectations; (2) monitor performance without micromanaging it; and (3) confer performance consequences for delivery on expectations.[2]

Positive performance consequences may include no more than praise or an inexpensive "thank you" such as tickets to a sports event. Negative consequences may include private, verbal correction or removal from the team. Be advised—ignoring poor performance can have a devastating impact on the project team's performance[3].

Resources

Web Based Resources

Gantthead. www.gantthead.com.

TechRepublic. www.techrepublic.com. PM

Boulevard. www.pmboulevard.com.

Articles

Caulfield, Brian. "How to Spot Potential Pitfalls Before You Begin That Big IT Project."
Business 2.0 Web Site. Aug. 2001. 16 Dec. 2002

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Books

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Cleland, David I., and Lewis R. Ireland. Project Management: Strategic Design and Implementation. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

LaFasto, Frank M. J., and Carl E. Larson. When Teams Work Best. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 2001.

[1] Herbert M. Lefcourt, Locus of Control: Current Trends in Theory and Research (Hillsdale: L. Erlbaum, 1982). [2] Judith L. Komaki, Leadership from an Operant Perspective: People and Organizations (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[3] Frank M. J. Lafasto and Carl E. Larson, When Teams Work Best (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001) 143-44.