

PROJECT MANAGEMENT – Some home truths (4)

The project objectives, scope and deliverables are defined, the team has been mobilised, a robust milestone plan and relevant activity schedules are in place. Who needs to do what by when is clear to all, and the project has moved from the start-up to the delivery phase. How do you now ensure the project is on track and stays on track? Here are some thoughts to help you get this right.

Truth Four – Monitoring and reporting progress. Beware the written word and note the power of the dumb question...

First and foremost, though to some it will sound like heresy, resist all efforts and desires to set up a traditional project management office (PMO), especially the variety that generates plenty of paperwork but adds very little value. The classic tell-tale signs that you have a non-value adding PMO include:

- ✓ Project plans are frequently updated, keep growing in size and complexity and no one is quite sure what is really going on. Indeed, they cannot tell if they are looking at the latest version or even what is different between that and the previous one.
- ✓ People are required to produce detailed 'progress' reports spread over several pages, highlighting 'issues' and 'actions' completed, with reports due by 'close of play' every Friday. The reports are dutifully filed, but nothing really happens as...
- ✓ ... by the time the progress reports are collated, reviewed and acted on, it is time for the next report to be written. The next progress report asks for a progress update on the issues raised in the last report, and the treadmill keeps on turning.

Now, clearly for large projects I am not saying that the project leader does not need some support, but project admin should be kept to the absolute minimum necessary and not become a mini-industry. Keep it simple should be the mantra here, and you should also make clear that it is OK to report 'nothing to report'.

Remember that progress reports do not always need to be in writing; there is no law of the universe that says this must be so. Verbal reports can cover all the essential aspects (progress against milestones, key issues, risks, work planned, etc.), take less time to make and issues can be probed and resolved. The progress report is not there just to provide reassurance, but also to enable people to have good conversations that get below the surface to solve problems and agree actions.

Work in
progress!!
check back soon...

In my view, reporting should be short and often, and, if in writing, make it no more than one side of A4 to capture what is essential to know, using colours to flag attention.

Remember that the written word and spoken word are two very different modes of communication. What people say is not always as important as how they say it, and you can pick up a lot from tone of voice and the pregnant pauses that greet your "So what exactly has been achieved?" type question.

Talking of questions, truly the dumbest one to ask is "How's the project going?" The answer is invariably along the lines of "Fine thanks", especially where it is not part of the culture to say what is really happening, or where giving a "Fine thanks" response is

acceptable, as it avoids being exposed to more (valuable) probing questions and challenges.

It is worth remembering that you get what you inspect, not what you expect. This goes beyond the 'what gets measured gets done' principle of management. It means that when someone has a key task to do by a certain date, the time to find out that they have not done it or not done it properly is not on the due date. Much better to give them a quick call to ask good questions like "how are you finding doing ...", "what steps have you completed so far..." or "when are you planning to work on ...". It is amazing how often you do make that quick call and get the response that it is next on their to-do list. The aim here is not to catch people failing, it is to help them succeed, be alert to the challenges they face and what might help them to get the job done.

As a consultant, when I am asked to do a health-check on a project, I can tell a lot by the responses I get when I ask individual team members 'what are the milestones and their due dates', 'is here anything



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stopping this project being successful' and 'where are you on the journey to success'. Answers to these questions are quite revealing. These questions, as any successful project sponsor reading this knows, are easy to ask, so I wonder why we so rarely hear them.

Monitoring on an 'intuitive' basis has to complement the excessively 'rational' monitoring that we see so much of in organisations these days. Being able to do this well will enable you to respond early to issues, remove blocking forces and better manage expectations carefully throughout the project lifecycle.

Project stakeholders, including steering groups, also need to be actively managed and engaged appropriately. So, flag issues early, communicate successes as well as problems, answer questions straight, and if you are stuck, make sure you propose alternative solutions and seek support. The same goes for the project team members during the journey.

Last but not least, to build great momentum and keep things firmly on track, it really does make a difference when success – individual and collective – is recognised. Learn tactics to celebrate appropriately when success is achieved, and encourage team members to talk about issues and learn from mistakes. In this way the project becomes a real learning vehicle. If mistakes are not made, very little has been achieved. The old adage 'the man who has never made a mistake, has never made anything' applies to projects as well.

Talking of learning, my next home truth article in this series will focus on completing interim and post implementation reviews: an important, yet often neglected, area of professional project management.

Gerry McAuley, Senior Associate, Sensei UKE – May 2011