17 Must Ask Questions for Planning Successful Projects

~ By Adele Sommers

Why do some projects proceed without a hitch, yet others flounder? One reason may be the type and quality of the questions people ask at the very start. Below are 17 insightful queries that can expose the uncertain aspects of your project, and thereby help you avoid expensive surprises later on.

1. How Would You Describe Your Project?

Explain as expressively as possible the ultimate, "big picture" vision and purpose of your completed endeavour. How will it look, feel, taste, sound, perform, increase productivity, help your customers, or otherwise benefit human kind?

2. What Are Your Goals and Objectives?

What are you trying to accomplish? List the project goals and objectives in terms that are clear, concise, achievable, and measurable. Example: "Produce a four-hour video training series on self-defence along with a training resource guide and database, to be accessible by college students on the Internet by May 2008."

3. Who Will Benefit From Your Project?

Examples of audiences or beneficiaries include: Clients, customers, customers' customers, local communities, wildlife, students, and specific population segments.

4. Will You Be Creating Any Products?

Examples include: Books, publications, studies, reports, manuals, video, audio, multimedia productions, tools, instructional materials, graphics, software and information systems, websites, databases, widgets, and special equipment.

5. Will You Be Providing Any Services?

Examples include: Providing telephone support, business software training, day care, statistical analysis, copy editing, and customer satisfaction surveying.
6. What Methods Will You Use?
For example, will you start by researching your audiences' needs? Will you use phases for design, development, implementation, pilot testing, and rollout?

7. What Kind of Schedule Do You Anticipate?
Will your project or programme involve an incremental implementation process that might occur over many months or years? If so, what long-term phases are you anticipating? Are there critical milestones within these phases? Can you create a detailed schedule for near-term tasks you will be performing?

8. Will You Need Any Partners or Collaborators?
Many types of projects will benefit from teaming up with partners who can offer complementary strengths or a long-term track record in an important area. Do you anticipate joining forces with other organisations, consultants, or agencies to complete the project? If so, what experience, expertise, credibility, funding, or other benefits will each party bring to the table?

9. Will You Need Specific Information or Advice?
Do you plan to seek information and help from subject matter experts or other advisors? Will you need to perform research, and if so, what sources will you tap? Examples include Internet resources, company documentation, service reports, trouble logs, customer feedback, surveys, focus group data, evaluation forms, census data, libraries, and formal studies.

10. Will You Need Special Systems or Equipment?
Some projects require setting up a technology infrastructure to create or deliver the products or services. Examples of items in your infrastructure might include: Servers, networks, computers and peripheral devices, and multimedia, sound, or video systems.

11. Will You Need to Use Special Tools or Templates?
Some projects require using a certain set of software tools or a specific set of templates or techniques. It's important to specify these at the beginning so that everyone will be clear about what's required.

12. How Will You Evaluate Project Success?
How will you measure the progress and effectiveness of your project? Will you collect information on how you are carrying out your stated objectives (process evaluations), and how well you are serving the needs of your target audiences (outcome evaluations)?
13. Who Needs to Review and Approve Decisions?

Will there be a clear process for submitting items for review and approval, and a set timeframe for receiving comments back? What protocol will be used? A key consideration is whether there will be a single responsible party with the authority to reconcile differing opinions if a review team can’t reach a consensus.

14. How Might Your Project Evolve over Time?

Why should what happens in the future be so important today? One reason is that implementing downstream opportunities can be hindered or helped by decisions that occur at the start. It’s not unusual for a short-lived, "one-time only" effort to take on a life of its own by adding unexpected phases, variations, and versions - so why not plan ahead?

15. Who Will Be Responsible for What?

This aspect is especially important when multiple parties will contribute to the outcome, and even more so when they are dependent on one another. For example, your detailed schedule for Task X might specify that "Completing Task X depends on Person Y in Company C providing the ABC Results by such-and-such a date."

16. What Risks Should You Plan to Manage?

Nothing is more difficult that anticipating, flagging, and managing potential risks to a project as a whole, or to the successful completion of your part of it. After all, no one wants to admit potential failure, right? However, risk is a normal part of everyday life, and with proper attention, we can manage it!

17. What Open Issues Remain?

What issues and concerns remain after all topics above have been considered? You and your team may be keeping a running list of unanswered questions and unknowns. What are these items, and how and when do you think they will be resolved? Do they present risks until they are answered?

By thinking through the questions above, you can achieve your project goals with much less guesswork and far fewer problems than you may have experienced in the past.

Adele Sommers, Ph.D. is the author of the award-winning “Straight Talk on Boosting Business Performance” programme. She helps people “discover and recover” the profits their businesses may be losing every day through overlooked performance potential. To sign up for more free tips, visit her site at LearnShareProsper.com

©Project Smart. All rights reserved ~ www.projectsmart.co.uk