20 Questions All Project Managers Should Ask

~ By Michelle Symonds

One of the many skills required of a project manager is the ability to ask searching questions and persevere until a clear answer is obtained. Many of the pitfalls in projects could be avoided if questions were articulated fully and if the answers were given clearly and in detail.

Too often areas of a project that should be clearly defined are not. Assumptions are made about who is responsible for what and, even worse; assumptions are made about what exactly the business objectives are and what benefits the project will deliver to the organisation.

In our enthusiasm to get started on an exciting new project, it is easy for everyone, not just the project manager, to rush through the early preparation stages of a project and get on to the exciting parts. But in uncertain economic times every project should be delivering substantial business benefits that can be accurately measured. The benefits might be time or cost savings, but equally they might be aimed at maintaining a certain reputation (or rescuing a failing one), so they are not always easy to measure and cannot always be accurately predicted in advance. Nevertheless, the expected benefits should be documented, so it is clear to everyone involved why the project is needed.

No list of questions is ever exhaustive, but here are 20 questions a project manager should always ask, whatever type of project they are working on in any type of organisation:

1. What are the business goals the project is aiming to achieve?
2. What business benefits will these goals deliver if achieved?
3. What will be the consequences to the business (financial, reputation, etc.) if the project does not go ahead or fails to deliver the objectives?
4. Are there any easy-to-implement alternatives to this project? Sometimes other solutions are available that do not require the cost implications of a full-blown project.
5. Are there any disadvantages to implementing this project? Staff redundancies might be an obvious one, but there might be some that are less obvious.
6. Who is the main stakeholder, with ultimate responsibility for driving the project forward? It is important that someone senior takes ownership of a project – that person should never be the project manager.
7. Who is responsible for ensuring appropriate resources (time, people and money) are allocated to the project? This should be someone with the authority to allocate whatever resources are required.
8. Who will be responsible for deciding whether the project goes ahead or not after the initial investigations? This will often be a group of people, sometimes with conflicting aims.
9. Is the new project dependent on the successful delivery of a current project? If so, a full report on the status of the project already underway should be obtained before committing to the new project.
10. What are the success criteria that will indicate the objectives have been met and the benefits delivered?
11. Will new equipment/products be required to facilitate project delivery, for example, is new software needed?
12. Will there be any necessary staff changes (redundancies or new hires)?
13. Will existing staff require re-training, for example, to learn new business processes?
14. Which individuals, teams or departments will be involved in the project?
15. Who will be responsible for documenting the business requirements in detail?
16. Who will determine interim and final deadlines? Projects where the marketing department, for example, decide on a deadline for an IT project have a far less chance of success than when informed estimates are made about the resources required.
17. How much contingency will be available in the budget?
18. Who will be responsible for making the decisions to include or exclude requested changes once the project is underway?
19. Will the project deliverables need to be tested and, if so, by whom?
20. Who will provide the final approval of the project deliverable?

There are many more questions that could be asked to ensure a project starts off with a good chance of success. But just as important as asking a question is getting a proper answer. The majority of people will have received appropriate training for project managers to help them develop a series of questions that is most relevant for their business. Those new to project management can benefit from knowledge-based training such as APM IC or one of the PMP credentials.