Helping Project Teams Succeed

~ By Duncan Haughey

How often do we hear project managers complaining that they have been set-up to fail? If you’re like me then often. I am sure that organisations want their project managers to succeed. So, where does the 'set-up to fail' idea come from if this is true? Could it be the organisation doesn’t have an environment that supports success?

Projects will be successful when the right environmental conditions exist. It is important to make sure that project estimating and project selection are working well and done carefully. Just as important is finding the right team and providing the necessary resources.

Always encourage good practice in planning. Plans are used to manage a project and must be kept up-to-date. If you create plans at the beginning of a project, put them in a drawer and forget them, why bother creating them in the first place?

Focus on implementation control, not just reporting. Use exception reporting on well-planned projects and assume if you hear nothing everything is running according to plan.

If your project teams succeed despite your organisation, rather than because of it, read on.

Creating the Right Environment

Creating an environment that supports success is a significant step towards helping your project teams succeed. Everybody needs to work together and help one another; this includes customers and suppliers.

Make sure everyone understands the organisations' strategy, business plan and current priorities. Ensure people know where their business unit or department fits into the plan.

Find out whether project managers follow a consistent structure, process and method. Consistent doesn’t mean rigid.

If you answer no to any of the following questions then your environment doesn’t fully support success:

1. Has the organisations' strategy, business plan and current priorities been cascaded down from the leadership?
2. Do people know how they will help the organisation achieve it strategy and business plan?
3. Is project management taken seriously in your organisation?
4. Are people encouraged to challenge the project management methodology and improve it?

If this is not the case, then you need to do something about it.
Project Estimating

Good estimating is about allocating the right amount of time and effort to projects. Link estimation to categorisation and risk. Many organisations underachieve in the area of risk management.

It is also important to link estimation to project definition. Always establish the definition before you estimate the project. It also helps if you involve the project manager in the estimation and selection process.

Projects fall into different categories, decide what type a project is. One example of categorisation is:

1. **Runner** (something we know how to do, easy to plan and estimate, low risk and easy to perform)
2. **Repeater** (a runner with a difference, something outside the norm)
3. **Stranger** (something we have little experience of, but know can be done, harder to plan and estimate, higher risk and difficult to execute)
4. **Alien** (a project nobody has done before, hard to plan and estimate, high risk and unclear how to perform)

In estimates, it is advisable to use ranges rather than exact figures for projects other than runners. "The cost will be between $n$ and $n$." The Project Management Institute (PMI) suggests a -25% and +75% range for projects other than runners. For senior people who insist on an exact figure, give them the top one. For projects classified as aliens, split them up and estimate in stages.

To gain buy-in involve project teams in the estimating process, at the very least, run the estimate by them.

For each project, clarify the measure of success. Which is more important?

- On time (schedule)
- On budget (cost)
- Accuracy (quality)

Project Selection

A good practice approach for selecting projects with the highest value is the stage and gate process. This process tests for high-value projects by considering fit with the organisations' strategy, whether the cost and benefits are valid periodically and by considering any risks emerging at each gate.

Projects tend to start optimistically, and the stage and gate process allows management to evaluate and validate projects during their life cycle.

Be prepared to match the organisations portfolio to capacity:

- Consider how a project fits into the portfolio
- What are the projects impact on the capacity of the organisation?
- Avoid doing too many projects at the same time

As project management author Bob Buttrick pointed out in his book Project Workout, “Directing the individual project correctly will ensure it is done right. Directing all the projects successfully will ensure we are doing the right projects.”
Project Team Selection

The team that will estimate the project is usually different from the implementation team. You won’t know what the team make up is until the project is understood.

Base team structures on project need. Should people be:

- Full time or part time?
- Reporting to the project manager?
- Allocated for 100% of their time?

Don’t employ resources on an 'as needed basis', use a qualified number, for example, 20% per week for three weeks.

The project sponsor is not just a title; they should support the project and help resolve issues. Worse still is not having a project sponsor - don’t start the project!

Don’t get pushed into doing the project at the expense of planning. Provide adequate time for planning and team building. Support virtual teams, they take longer to develop and much more time to manage.

Project Planning

Good project planning means linking planning to requirements, estimates and selection. Base plans on standard working practice, don’t start with an end date and work back reducing the estimate. It is better to increase the number of resources, reduce scope or change the plan. Remember, a lot of time-pressure causes inefficiency with meetings to discuss why things are going wrong.

Create a project contract or project brief in which you specify the roles and responsibilities. Use it if issues arise.

Agree to a change control process as part of the planning. Change control protects everybody, helps avoid scope creep and stops senior people changing the plan.

Encourage continuous risk management and make sure you baseline and re-baseline your projects.

Control Rather Than Reporting

Creating project plans at the beginning of a project and putting them in a drawer, never to look at them again, is a waste of time. Shocking news to some people, I’m sure. If your project team does this, then stop, it has no value.

Encourage plans to be updated and used as a reference point for project assessment. Facilitate an 'earned value' approach where you monitor the plan; actual and work completed value.

The project managers responsibility is to measure, assess, adjust and then report things they cannot control, along with a summary of what is going to happen next. Reporting everything that has occurred in a project takes the focus away from running the project. Report by exception and assume if you don’t hear anything that everything has happened according to the plan.

Project teams will be successful when the right environmental conditions exist; sadly this is not always the case. Don’t leave your project teams to succeed despite the organisation. Take steps to create an environment that supports success. After all, it’s not rocket science!