A Practical Approach to Project Management

~ By Duncan Haughey

What Is Practical Project Management?

At the core of practical project management is an ability for keeping things simple. Not getting bogged down in lengthy and unwieldy processes. It does not mean cutting corners. Good project management practice is still necessary; it is about keeping it lean and mean. This, and getting the basics right, will help you deliver a successful project.

Beginning

Following these basic principles will give your project a good start:

- Keep it simple!
- Identify the stakeholders
- Ask who benefits?
- Gain agreement to proceed
- Deliver the plan
- Follow the project idea through to use

Requirements Gathering

Take a piece of paper and draw a house. Now ask five people to each draw a house and compare it with the one you have drawn. Hey, presto, five houses different from yours. You may have townhouses, family houses, bungalows, maisonettes, the list goes on. All houses, but different in style, size, layout, decor and many other ways. The same applies to project requirements. Your view of the customer’s needs could be different to that of your customer. Ensure you gather a concise, accurate and signed-off set of requirements before you start building.

Communicating

Does everyone in your team understand the project well enough to give an elevator speech? If the answer is no, create a one-page executive summary of the project that contains all of the essential information. The
content of your executive summary might look something like this:

- Project name - give it a name that brings it to life
- Start and finish date - everyone needs a target
- Project leader - the right person for the job
- Objective - make it clear and concise
- Business potential - agreement at every level
- Ideas summary - outline of what it is
- Major issues - what are the stumbling blocks
- Timeline - hitting the milestones
- Resources and materials - everyone likes to know up front
- Budget - what do you need, who signs it off
- Evaluation - measurement of the project outcome
- Ideas for improvement - sets you up for your next project

Circulate this summary to all of your stakeholders before you start the project.

Kicking Off

By now, you've now got an agreed set of requirements and have communicated the project to everyone that needs to know. It's time to begin. Arrange a project kick-off meeting:

- Invite attendees. Everyone needs to be there
- Send an executive summary to everyone before the meeting
- Involve end-users of the project output
- Stay in control of the meeting
- Request feedback to identify any problem areas

At the meeting, ask attendees to explain what the project is aiming to deliver and to describe their involvement. Also, ask what they need, what the potential problems are and how they are going to manage them.

Controlling

Now the project is underway you must deliver the plan; communicate progress and manage resources. Here is where you earn your money.

- Stick to the plan, examine it regularly and adjust
- Provide regular updates and don't let the project slip
- Put people on the spot
- Get work done no matter what happens
- Test, test and test again
- Keep the end-users involved
Delivering
You’ve created something new; now people must use it.

- Make sure it works!
- Create a fanfare
- Choose the right person to champion it
- Don’t forget the training

Follow-up by having pre-arranged meetings in place to ensure everything is working as planned.

Problem Areas
Watch out for these commonplace project management gotchas:

- Creating a 50-page plan you’ll never carry out. Heed this advice from General George S. Patton, “A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week.”
- Filing project assets incorrectly and as a consequence wasting time looking for them
- Allowing people to involve themselves in areas where they have little or no knowledge. Their involvement wastes time and money. Avoid!
- Creating bottlenecks that slow your project down. Remove them!

Reminders
These are some of the important items you need to bear in mind before, during and after project delivery:

- Create the right environment so people will take ownership of their part of the project
- Baseline your project plan so you can see progress over time
- Evaluate project progress continually asking, “How are we doing?”
- Add some slack to your project plan because some things will take longer than you think
- Create simple and easy to understand project documentation
- Test using independent people
- Check with the customer after delivery to make sure everything is working
- Look for improvement opportunities
- Check delivery of the expected benefits is on track
- Document lessons learned from your projects
- Kill failing projects quickly
- Celebrate if the project hits its schedule
- Have fun!
Final Thought

Keep your project processes simple. Hefty project processes can be a disabler to killing projects. As English businessman, Sir John Harvey-Jones recognised, “There are times when you have to kill your favourite children.” He was talking about businesses, but the same applies to projects.

A successful project comes with great leadership, not lengthy and unwieldy project management processes, so keep it simple!