The Purpose of Project Management and Setting Objectives

~ By Brian Miller

Project Management has developed in order to plan, co-ordinate and control the complex and diverse activities of modern industrial and commercial projects. All projects share one common characteristic - the projection of ideas and activities into new endeavours.

The purpose of project management is to foresee or predict as many dangers and problems as possible; and to plan, organise and control activities so that the project is completed as successfully as possible in spite of all the risks. The ever-present element of risk and uncertainty means that events and tasks leading to completion can never be foretold with absolute accuracy. For some complex or advanced projects, even the possibility of successful completion might be of serious doubt.

Project management can involve the following activities:
- planning - deciding what is to be done;
- organising - making arrangements;
- staffing - selecting the right people for the job;
- directing - giving instructions;
- monitoring - checking on progress;
- controlling - taking action to remedy hold ups;
- innovation - coming up with new solutions;
- representing - liaising with users.

Setting Objectives

Effective objectives in project management are specific. A specific objective increases the chances of leading to a specific outcome. Therefore objectives shouldn't be vague, such as “to improve customer relations,” because they are not measurable. Objectives should show how successful a project has been, for example “to reduce customer complaints by 50%” would be a good objective. The measure can be, in some cases, a simple yes or no answer, for example, “did we reduce the number of customer complaints by 50%?”

While there may be one major project objective, in pursuing it there may be interim project objectives. In lots of instances, project teams are tasked with achieving a series of objectives in pursuit of the final objective. In many cases, teams can only proceed in a stair step fashion to achieve the desired outcome. If they were to proceed in any other manner, they may not be able to develop the skills or insights along the way that will enable them to progress in a productive manner.

Objectives can often be set under three headings:

1. Performance and Quality

The end result of a project must fit the purpose for which it was intended. At one time, quality was seen as the responsibility of the quality control department. In more recent years the concept of total quality management has come to the fore, with the responsibility for quality shared by all staff from top management downwards.
2. Budget

The project must be completed without exceeding the authorised expenditure. Financial sources are not always inexhaustible and a project might be abandoned altogether if funds run out before completion. If that was to happen, the money and effort invested in the project would be forfeited and written off. In extreme cases the project contractor could face ruin. There are many projects where there is no direct profit motive, however it is still important to pay proper attention to the cost budgets, and financial management remains essential.

3. Time to Completion

Actual progress has to match or beat planned progress. All significant stages of the project must take place no later than their specified dates, to result in total completion on or before the planned finish date. The timescale objective is extremely important because late completion of a project is not very likely to please the project purchaser or the sponsor.

Conclusion

Project management has developed over the years, and involves various activities before a project is completed. Objectives should be specific so they are measurable, and although there may be one major project objective, there may be minor objectives throughout the project.

Brian Miller wrote the article "The Purpose of Project Management and Setting Objectives" and recommends you visit www.AFAprojects.com for more information on project management skills.