Ten Tips for Running Successful Projects

~ By Leslie Allan

Why do so many projects fail? Researchers regularly conduct studies to find out the leading causes of project failure. Some of the studies are in the public domain. You can look up studies by such groups as Gartner, Carnegie Mellon University and the Project Management Institute. The studies reveal a recurring theme. Here are some of the common causes they identify:

- Poorly defined organisational objectives
- Loose project sponsorship and executive leadership
- Project manager untrained
- Loose scope containment and project change control
- Poorly defined requirements
- Lack of consultation with key project stakeholders
- No risk management plan
- Unrealistic project estimates

Do any of these look familiar to you? Do you recognise one or more as handicaps in your organisation? I have summarised below the top ten things you can do to improve the chances of success of your projects:

1. Before you start your project, find a committed project sponsor who has sufficient clout in your organisation. Your project sponsor will prove invaluable in helping you overcome organisational roadblocks as they arise.

2. Analyse who are your project’s key stakeholders and communicate with them throughout the project. Your stakeholders can make or break your project. Compile a stakeholder communication plan with the help of your project team and sponsor.

3. Get your sponsor and key stakeholders together to thrash out the measures of success of your project. How will you know if your project has succeeded? What are the key indicators of success? Get everyone on the same page from the outset.

4. Decide upfront the methodology you will use on your project. What project phases will the project proceed through? What will be the key go/no go decision points? What are the expected project outputs for each phase?

5. Draw up a project schedule that clearly allocates project tasks to team members. Identify which tasks depend on others for their successful completion. Communicate schedule progress regularly to all team members and to the project’s sponsor.

6. Make sure that project changes don’t get out of hand by reviewing and authorising all proposed changes. Evaluate each proposed change for the impact on project cost, quality and schedule.

7. Do not let an unforeseen event sink your project. Find out what risks can threaten your project and build a risk mitigation strategy into your project plan. Issues will also arise from time to time, so you will need to keep track of these and communicate their impact to all concerned.
8. Decide at the start which documents your project will generate and when. For medium and small sized projects, keep documentation requirements to a manageable level without significantly increasing the risk to the project.

9. Once your project finishes, use the measures of success that you agreed at the start to evaluate project performance. Was it within budget? Was it on schedule? Did it produce what it was meant to produce, and at the required quality? What can you learn from this? Now report your project's performance to your sponsor and the key stakeholders.

10. Follow up with the key stakeholders and your project team members and find out how they felt about the project. Was the project a success from their perspective? How did the project impact them personally? From this you will discover what went well and what did not go so well. Apply these lessons to your next project.

Successful projects do not just happen. They require structured planning, the right tools, insightful management and good interpersonal skills. Use the ten tips above to help make your next project a winner.

Leslie Allan is Managing Director of Business Performance Pty Ltd and editor of A Guide to Project Management Visit his company’s website at Business Perform for a range of practical project management tools and templates and to download the free project management guide introductory chapter.

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