

# Eight Key Factors to Ensuring Project Success

By Duncan Haughey

As a project manager, you are ultimately responsible for delivering a successful project. The buck stops with you, so it is in your interest to make sure relevant tools and techniques are used to make this happen. Some of the following may sound obvious, but I encounter these basic mistakes month in month out, with project managers left scratching their heads wondering where it all went wrong.



## 1. Business Case

Make sure there is a strong business case that everyone can buy into with high-level support. The business case is the justification for the project and should list the expected benefits. The business case is something everyone involved in the project can focus on and why the project is taking place. Projects move us from one state to another by delivering a change, product or other desired outcome, with a business case explaining why.

“Learn all you can from the mistakes of others. You won't have time to make them all yourself.”

*-Alfred Sheinwold*



## 2. Critical Success Factors

Define with the customer the critical success factors that will make the project a success. Make sure your essential elements of success are measurable, such as a 20% reduction in the cost of raw materials by the end of the year. Use these factors at the end of the project to measure your success. These measures count and the 'must have' items that the project needs to deliver. All other issues are secondary as the critical success factors effectively form your contract with the customer.

## 3. Planning

Time spent planning is time well spent. All projects must have a plan with enough detail so that everyone involved knows where the project is going.

A good project plan provides the following benefits:

- Documented project milestones and deliverables.
- A realistic timeline.
- Accurate cost estimates.
- Details resource requirements.
- Acts as an early warning system, providing visibility of task slippage.
- Keeps the project team focused and aware of progress.

To skimp on this area is likely to lead to problems. Ensure you build in contingency to any estimate. I recommend between 10 and 15 per cent. I prefer to be a little pessimistic and deliver early; not optimistic and deliver late. Be careful, add too much contingency, and you may look inefficient.

## 4. Team Motivation

A motivated team will go the extra mile to deliver a project on time and budget. Motivate your team by keeping them involved throughout the project and planning frequent milestones to help them feel they are making progress. Communication is vital, so let your team know when they perform well, not just when performing poorly.

## 5. Saying No!

Believe it or not, some project managers and some team members come to that, have a problem saying no. Never promise anything you know you cannot deliver. You are just storing up problems for later. Please stick to your guns no matter how senior the person is, and they'll thank you for it later. If they don't, perhaps you're in the wrong job. When saying no, be firm and ready to justify the reasons behind your decision.

## 6. Avoiding Scope Creep

Scope creep must be one of the most common reasons projects run over budget and deliver late. The customer may forget the extra work and effort you have put in, insisting that you gave them what they originally asked. Make sure you set expectations correctly at the outset of the project and clearly define what is in and out of scope. Record it in the project documentation. Don't assume the customer will read and digest this document. I recommend that you spend an hour with the customer to walk them through the project and make sure they understand and agree to the scope. Don't proceed without a firm agreement.

## 7. Risk Management

Avoid risk management at your peril. Nobody likes to think about risks, especially early in the project. I suggest you produce a risk log with an action plan to minimise every significant risk and publish it to your project's stakeholders. Knowing what action you will take, should the worst happen, will be a great comfort.

## 8. Project Closure

Remember that projects have a finite life. A project that isn't closed will continue to consume resources. It is in the customer's interest to keep the project open to add new features and functionality as they think of them. At the end of the project, be firm and agree with the customer that the critical success factors have been met, delivered, tested, and released and ask them to sign the project off. I like to use a customer acceptance form that I lodge with the Project Office. At this point, you may want to ask your customer to fill out a satisfaction survey. They may have valuable information that can help you and your team improve for future projects.

### Final thought...

Applying these eight simple techniques will help you avoid common problems that trip project managers up. The key to good project management is leadership and communication. Never leave it too late to tell people what is happening, especially if the news is bad. Bad news only gets worse the longer you ignore it.