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. This is something everyone involved in the project can focus on and the reason 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 Critical Success Factors 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. This is all that counts and the 'must have' items that the project needs to deliver. All other issues are secondary to these 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 plan provides the following benefits:

- Clearly documented project milestones and deliverables.
- A valid and realistic timescale.
- Allows accurate cost estimates to be produced.
- 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 percent. I prefer to be a little pessimistic and deliver early; not optimistic and deliver late. Be careful though, add too much contingency and you could be seen as inefficient.
4. Team Motivation

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

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. Stick to your guns no matter how senior or important the person is, 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 is 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 have delivered what they asked for originally. 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 key project document. Don't assume the customer will read and understand this document. I recommend that you spend an hour with the customer to walk them through the project and make sure that they understand and agree to the scope. Don't proceed without a firm agreement.

7. Risk Management

Nobody likes to think about risks, especially early in the project. Avoid risk management at your peril. I suggest that you produce a risk log with an action plan to minimise each risk and then publish it to all the key stakeholders in your project. 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 so they can add new features and functionality as they think of them. At the end of the project be firm, agree with the customer that the Critical Success Factors have been met, the project delivered, tested, 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 like 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.

Conclusions

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