

Lesson 3: What Do You Want to Accomplish

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In this lesson, you learn how important it is to fully understand the project, what kinds of projects lend themselves to project management, and why it is important to start with the end in mind.

To Lead and to Handle Crises

Project managers come in many varieties, but if you were to boil down the two primary characteristics of project managers they would be

- A project manager's ability to lead a team. This is largely dependent upon the managerial and personal characteristics of the project manager.
- A project manager's ability to handle the critical project issues. This involves the project manager's background, skills, and experience in handling these and similar issues.

If you could only pick one set of attributes for a project manager, either being good at the people side of managing projects or being good at the technical side of managing projects, which do you suppose, over the broad span of all projects ever undertaken, has proven to be the most valuable? You guessed it, the people side.

In his book, *Information Systems Project Management*, author Jolyon Hallows observes, "Hard though it may be to admit, the people side of projects is more important than the technical side. Those who are anointed or appointed as project managers because of their technical capability have to overcome the temptation of focusing on technical issues rather than the people or political issue that invariably becomes paramount to project success."

Tip - If you are managing the project alone, you can remain as technically oriented as you like.

Even on a solo project, given that you will end up having to report to others, the people side never entirely goes away. Your ability to relate to the authorizing party, fellow project managers, and any staff people who may only tangentially be supporting your efforts can spell the difference between success and failure for your project.

Key Questions

On the road to determining what you want to accomplish, it is important to understand your project on several dimensions. Hallows suggests asking key questions, including:

- Do I understand the project's justification? Why does someone consider this project to be important? If you are in a large organization, this means contemplating why the authorizing party initiated the assignment and whom he or she had to sell before you were brought into the picture.
- Do I understand the project's background? It is unlikely that the project exists in a vacuum. Probe to find out what has been done in this area previously, if anything. If the project represents a new method or procedure, what is it replacing? Is the project a high priority item within your organization, or is it something that is not necessarily crucial to continuing operations?
- Do I understand the project's politics? Who stands to benefit from the success of the full completion of this project? Whose feathers may be ruffled by achieving the desired outcome? Who will be supportive? Who will be resistant?

- **Do I understand who the players are and the role they will take? Who can and will contribute their effort and expertise to the project? Who will be merely bystanders, and who will be indifferent?**
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Plain English - Politics The relationship of two or more people with one another, including the degree of power and influence that the parties have over one another.

Hallows says that projects involve "the dynamic mix of people with different interests, philosophies, values, approaches and priorities. One of your main functions as a project manager," particularly in regards to what you want to accomplish, is to "ensure that this mix becomes coherent and drives the project forward." He warns that, "the alternative is chaos."

Caution - Project management is not for the meek. At times, you will have to be tough and kick some proverbial derriere. As a project manager, you become the human representative for the project. Think of the project as taking on a life of its own, with you as its spokesperson.

Okay, So What are We Attempting to Do?

A post mortem of projects that failed reveals that all too often the projects were begun "on the run," rather than taking a measured approach to determining exactly what needs to be accomplished. Too many projects start virtually in motion, before a precise definition of what needs to be achieved is even concocted.

In some organizations, projects are routinely rushed from the beginning. Project managers and teams are given near-impossible deadlines, and the only alternative is for the project players to throw their time and energy at the project, working late into the evening and on weekends. All of this is in the vainglorious attempt to produce results in record time and have "something" to show to top management, a client, the VP of product development, the sales staff, or whomever.

Tip - Teams that start in a rush, and accelerate the pace from there, run the risk of being more focused on producing *a* deliverable instead of *the* deliverable. The solution is to define precisely what needs to be done and then to stick to the course of action that will lead to the accomplishment of the goal.

In properly defining the project, Hallows suggests a few basic questions, including the following:

- **Have I defined the project deliverables?** The deliverables (as discussed in Lesson 1, "So You're Going to Manage a Project?") could also be analogous to outcomes, are often associated with project milestones, and represent the evidence or proof that the project team is meeting the challenge or resolving the issue for which they were initially assembled.
- **Have I established the scope—both system and project?** This involves determining exactly the level of effort required for all aspects of the project, and often plotting the scope and required effort out on a wall chart or using project management software (the topic of Lessons 7, 8, 10, and 11).
- **Have I determined how deliverables will be reviewed and approved?** It is one thing to produce a deliverable on time, is quite another to have the air kicked out of your tires because the reviewing body used criteria that were foreign to you. The remedy is to ensure at the outset that everyone is on the same page in terms of

what is to be accomplished. In that regard, it pays to spend more time at the outset than some project managers are willing to spend to determine the deliverables' review and approval processes to which the project manager and project team will be subject.

Tip - Abraham Lincoln once said that if he had eight hours to cut down a tree he would spend six hours sharpening the saw.

Tasks Versus Outcomes

One of the recurring problems surrounding the issue of "What is it that needs to be accomplished?" is over-focusing on the project's tasks, as opposed to the project's desired outcome. Project managers who jump into a project too quickly sometimes become enamored by bells and whistles associated with project tasks, rather than critically identifying the specific, desired results that the overall project should achieve. The antidote to this trap is to start with the end in mind, an age-old method for ensuring that all project activities are related to the desired outcome.

Tip - By having a clear vision of the desired end, all decisions made by the project staff at all points along the trail will have a higher probability of being in alignment with the desired end.

The desired end is never nebulous. It can be accurately described. It is targeted to be achieved within a specific timeframe at a specific cost. The end is quantifiable. It meets the challenge or solves the problem for which the project management team was originally assembled. As I pointed out in my book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Reaching Your Goals*, it pays to start from the ending date of a project and work back to the present, indicating the tasks and subtasks you need to undertake and when you need to undertake them.

Plain English - Subtask A slice of a complete task; a divisible unit of a larger task. Usually, a series of subtasks leads to the completion of a task.

Tip - Starting from the ending date of project is a highly useful procedure because when you proceed in reverse, you establish realistic interim goals that can serve as project targets dates.

Telling Questions

My co-author for two previous books, including *Marketing Your Consulting and Professional Services* (John Wiley & Sons) and *Getting New Clients* (John Wiley & Sons), is Richard A. Connor. In working on projects with professional service firms, Richard used to ask, "How will you and I know when I have done the job to your satisfaction?"

Some clients were disarmed by this question; they had never been asked it before. Inevitably, answers began to emerge. Clients would say things such as:

- Our accounting and record-keeping costs will decline by 10 percent from those of last year.
- We will retain for at least two years a higher percentage of our new recruits than occurred with our

previous recruiting class.

- We will receive five new client inquiries per week, starting immediately.
- Fifteen percent of the proposals we write will result in signed contracts, as opposed to our traditional norm of 11 percent.

Richard Connor's question can be adopted by all project managers as well.

"How will my project team and I know that we have completed the project to the satisfaction of those charged with assessing our efforts?" The response may turn out to be multipart, but invariably the answer homes in on the essential question for all project managers who choose to be successful: "What needs to be accomplished?"

Desired Outcomes that Lend Themselves to Project Management

Almost any quest in the business world can be handled by applying project management principles. If you work for a large manufacturing, sales, or engineering concern, especially in this ultra-competitive age, there are an endless number of worthwhile projects, among them:

- To reduce inventory holding costs by 25 percent by creating more effective, just-in-time inventory delivery systems
- To comply fully with environmental regulations, while holding operating costs to no more than one percent of the company's three-year norm
- To reduce the "time to market" for new products from an average of 182 days to 85 days
- To increase the average longevity of employees from 2.5 years to 2.75 years
- To open an office in Atlanta and to have it fully staffed by the 15th of next month

If you are in a personal service firm, one of the many projects that you might entertain might include the following:

- To get five new appointments per month with qualified prospects
- To initiate a complete proposal process system by June 30
- To design, test, and implement the XYZ research project in this quarter
- To develop preliminary need scenarios in our five basic target industries
- To assemble our initial contact mailing package and begin the first test mailing within ten days

If you are an entrepreneur or work in an entrepreneurial firm, the types of projects you might tackle include the following:

- To find three joint-venture partners within the next quarter
- To replace the phone system within one month without any service disruption

- To reduce delivery expense by at least 18 percent by creating more circuitous delivery routes
- To create a database/dossier of our 10 most active clients
- To develop a coordinated 12-month advertising plan

Finally, if you are working alone, or simply seeking to rise in your career, the kinds of projects you may want to tackle include the following:

- To earn \$52,000 in the next 12 months
- To be transferred to the Hong Kong division of the company by next April
- To have a regular column in the company newsletter (or online 'zine) by next quarter
- To be mentioned in *Wired* magazine this year
- To publish your first book within six months

The 30-Second Recap

- Too many project managers have an inclination to leap into the project at top speed, without precisely defining what it is that needs to be accomplished and how project deliverables will be assessed by others who are crucial to the project's success.
- Project managers who are people oriented fare better than project managers who are task oriented, because people represent the most critical element in the accomplishment of most projects. A people-oriented project manager can learn elements of task management, whereas task-oriented managers are seldom effective at becoming people-oriented managers.
- It pays to start with the end in mind, to get a clear focus of what is to be achieved, and to better guide all decisions and activities undertaken by members of the project team.
- To know if you're on track, ask the telling question, "How will you and I know when I have done the job to your satisfaction?"

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