

Balancing Act - Defining the Project Manager's Role by Ed Naughton, Director General



I often get asked, "What does a project manager do?" I find it difficult to give a clear, concise and intelligible answer. Sometimes I say, "A project manager is responsible for meeting stakeholder needs and expectations." This usually generates a glazed look from the questioner.

Another response is, "A project manager is responsible for delivering the project's scope, time, cost and quality; in other words, determining what has to be done, when it will be done, for how much, and making sure that it works." A combination of the words "management" and "project" would identify that a project manager plans, organises, monitors and controls an undertaking that is both temporary and unique. However, none of this seems to explain to the uninitiated what a project manager actually does all day long.

The project manager operates on a number of fronts. On the quantitative side, the project manager has a toolkit that allows him to develop a project plan that integrates requirements, timeframe, budget, quality, risks, contracts and people. The application of this toolkit illustrates the logical, focused, organised approach that the project manager brings to the project.

The core of the plan is the accurate determination of the customer's true requirements. The project manager is acutely aware of this, and will dip into his bag of behavioural tricks to cultivate client cooperation, while simultaneously trying to detect shifts in priorities and direction that would later lead to the dreaded "scope creep." Remember, this project has never been done exactly like this before, so the project manager needs to think through all of the ramifications of the project plan to make sure that it will work and that problems and the inevitable roadblocks are minimised or avoided.

Having established an integrated and robust plan, the project manager sets an orderly environment for the standard housekeeping business of the project - types and frequency of meetings, distributing information, managing the project team, reporting plan updates, and clearing the way for the next activity.

The logic, order and procedures are now in place - all that remains is to get the people to act accordingly. This is where the communications, people management skills, and political onus of the project manager are evidenced.

First and foremost, the project manager is the communication link with whoever has their hands on the money supply i.e. sponsor, client, or customer. Their expectations must be managed, and confidence maintained. The project team must also be protected from undue external influence and intrusions. The communication channel is through the project manager. Influencing and managing key stakeholders is a major component of the project manager's job that requires a keen political awareness and sensitivity.

A project manager spends in excess of 80 percent of his time communicating, be it either in a formal or informal manner. Talking and listening to people, especially those beneath the highest level of command, enables the project manager to gauge the pulse of the project. The project manager needs to sift through and interpret the impact of such information and act accordingly - "remember, the big fish often swim in the deepest water." There are always unique problems to be solved, and it rests on the project manager to solve them.

Constant communication makes sure that the project team are motivated, well looked after, and continuously working to a consistent agenda.

In summary, the project manager constantly keeps an eye on the overall goal, acts in a speedy and effective manner, operates with an analytical approach, skilfully manages people, and is always on the lookout for trouble.

If the project is a resounding success, it is the result of the undeniable wisdom of the project sponsor, and the heroic efforts of the project team. If, on the other hand, the project is a complete failure, it is entirely the fault of the project manager. It has nothing to do with senior management's interference or the incompetence of the team.

Perhaps the question should be, "Why be a project manager?"