

Eight Key Factors to Ensuring Project Success

Introduction:

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

Business Case:

Ensure that there is a strong business case, with high level support, that everyone can buy into. 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 why the project is taking place. Projects move us from one state to another by deliver a change, product or other desired outcome, with the business case explaining why.

Critical Success Factors:

Define with the customer the Critical Success Factors that will make the project a success. Ensure that you make them measurable e.g. 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 achieve. All other issues are secondary to these as the Critical Success Factors effectively form your contract with the customer.

Planning:

Time spent planning is time well spent. All projects must have a plan with sufficient 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 time-scale
- 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 project progress

To skimp on this area is likely to lead to problems. Ensure that you build in contingency to any estimate. I recommend between 10 and 15 percent. I prefer to be a little pessimistic and deliver early rather than too optimistic and deliver late. Be careful though, add too many contingencies and you could give the impression of being inefficient.

Team Motivation:

A motivated team will go that 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 here, so let your team know when they are performing well, not just when they are performing badly.

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 can't 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 prepared to justify the reasons behind your decision.

Avoiding Scope Creep:

Scope creep is one of the most common reasons projects run over budget and deliver late. Don't forget the customer will forget the extra work and effort you have put in, insisting that you have delivered what they asked for originally. Ensure that 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 ensure that they understand and agree the scope. Don't proceed without a firm agreement.

Risk Management:

Nobody likes to think about risks especially early on in a project. Avoid risk management at your peril. I recommend 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.

Project Closure:

Remember that projects have a finite life. A project that isn't closed will continue to consume resources. It's 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 a 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 many common problems that befall many project managers. The key to good project management is communication with the project stakeholders. Never leave it too late to tell people what is happening, bad news only gets worse the longer you leave it.

Project Health Check:

Finally, here is a checklist that you can use to test the health of your project. Score each question using the grading shown to arrive at a total score and then check the overall health of your project using the table below.

[Project Name]

-4 = Strongly Disagree	-2 = Disagree	0 = Neutral	2 = Agree	4 = Strongly Agree
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No.	Question:	Score:
1.	A strong business case has been developed and approved	
2.	The project is in line with organisational strategy	
3.	I have the full support of senior management for the project	
4.	The benefits of the project are well understood and documented	
5.	A clear set of deliverables have been identified	
6.	The customer understands and has agreed the scope of the project	
7.	Critical success factors have been identified and agreed with the customer	
8.	Management will support a request for additional resources, if required	
9.	A detailed project plan exists	
10.	Frequent milestones have been built into the project plan	
11.	There are sufficient resources available until the end of the project	
12.	Everyone in the team understands their roll and is committed to the cause	
13.	All materials required for the project are available	
14.	A risk log has been completed and a plan formulated to minimise identified risks	
15.	A communications plan has been developed	
16.	The project time-scale is accurate and achievable	
17.	I am confident that the project has every chance of success	
18.	I have scored the above questions honestly and to the best of my knowledge	
	Score:	0

Score:	Probability of Success:	Description:
-72 to -36	Impossible	Do not attempt this project until you have addressed the -4 and -2 issues
> -36 to 0	Low	You have too many uncertain areas in this project. Focus on the -4 and -2 issues to improve the overall chances of success

> 0 to 36	Moderate	You may need to pay attention to any -4 and -2 issues you have identified to move this projects chance of success higher.
> 36 to 72	High	This project has every chance of success.
> = Greater than		