

## eSubnet Fragment Article

### A Case for Project Management

I am not a project manager, however, by working with some terrific professionals, I've learned some useful things; the most important being key projects should never be attempted without one.

A recent IT project we were involved in was managed by a department head instead of a project manager. The project was deployed, but it was not what anyone would call a success. The project was not delivered on time, it ran over budget, no one knew who was responsible for what, and, items were missed during the project deployment and were not corrected until up to five days later. In this article we will explore ways to avoid this outcome.

How things could have gone better

#### Meetings

People often complain that there are too many meetings. I feel quality meetings are essential at both ends of any project. There needs to be a kick-off meeting to ensure that everyone understands and agrees to the goal(s) of the project. This sounds overly simple, but it never ceases to amaze me how often people misunderstand project goals. In projects with more than 20 people participating, someone always needs clarification and keeping the project focused avoids a lot of grief from the get go.

Status update meetings are held to ensure that the project stays on track, and that issues are dealt with as they occur, before they become obstacles. The frequency of these status update meetings is entirely dependent on team size and diversity.

A wrap-up meeting or debriefing is the key to improvement, when a project uses primarily internal resources the people in this meeting have it tough. They must be honest with themselves and their co-workers, while leaving their emotions out in the hall. It is all too easy to give in to the impulse at this stage to lay blame, or to take on criticism personally. The goal of the debriefing is to ensure that the next project runs more successfully, debrief should always be used as a learning experience. Whether the project goes well or not the wrap-up meeting should cover what did we do well and what could we improve the next time out.

#### Ownership

Establishing who is responsible for what, and the timeline when they are to deliver that result, ensures that a project stays on track. Just saying what needs to be done doesn't mean that a specific task will be completed. Ownership allows for accountability, while the lack translates into incomplete work, and lost time and effort trying to determine what is left to complete.

#### Communication

Email is a powerful tool for business due to the low cost, and the ease of sending the same message to many people. Keeping the entire team aware of the status of the tasks, each team member stays informed of the progression of the project.

Outside influences, like vacation days, launch deadlines, relevant press release dates, etc., need to be shared with the team so that the timeline can be maintained.

Team members need the information they are requesting in a timely manner in order to properly complete the tasks assigned to them, so an ongoing communication strategy is very important, no team member or manager can afford to let email languish in their inbox.

#### Planning

The lack of a written plan is a likely sign that the project is doomed to failure. While you can use tools such as MS-Project, project planning software isn't a must; there are alternatives. I've found that MS-Excel is a simple yet effective tool for small project management and one that business people have easy access to. In using Excel for planning a project, I strongly recommend including at least these columns: Begin Date, End Date, Task, Task Description, Owner and Notes. Of course you can add other details as required. Each row holds a single task, and these can be listed in the order that they are required, thus providing a simple dependencies list. The spreadsheet should be distributed to everyone involved for review, reference, updates and comments.

The project plan describes the work required to complete the project. One practice I have seen is to work backwards from the project delivery date with all of the tasks required, creating a work back schedule of critical delivery dates. This allows people to understand why they need to have their own tasks completed on time.

#### Commitment

Committing to a project is crucial and means more than just participating. It means embracing the project vision and goals. When an important project with a tight deadline lacks the commitment of each stakeholder, the entire project is at risk.

The most common cause of break downs in commitment is scheduling conflicts with other work commitments. Team members need to understand and agree with the importance and value of completing the project, and prioritize accordingly as they each share the project's goal.

#### Conclusion

This may appear straightforward, but the situation I referred to above is unfortunately all too common as the ideas may seem simple, but the

success of any project all revolves around the execution of them.

“Studies show that 30%-70% of IT projects fail in some important way: they are late, over-budget, or do not achieve planned results. These facts are inherently negative and quickly lead toward uncovering roots of failure rather than examining causes of success.” [Five reasons to discuss project failure](#)

A few years ago, I worked with a project manager on a network cleanup project. The network was the internal network for an application service provider. The PM elicited needs, timelines, dependencies and commitments out of each department and every stakeholder committed to the ultimate project goal. This person was truly a manager and the project succeeded because of his project management skills. Where others, I like to call them, project dictators, like to tell the team when tasks need to be completed without checking first, a sure sign of disaster, good project managers use the skills of their team, and the tools available, to elicit the best from each participant.

Running a project with a written plan, communications, shared commitments, a work back schedule of all tasks and deadlines, and especially a shared understanding of the project goals, will ensure the results you wished to achieve.

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