

***Time
Management
for Project
Management***

Proper time management techniques are essential to good project management. In fact, project management considers time an important resource, and the timing of activities essential to achieving the project's goals. This and the fact that so many workers are responsible for projects makes it valuable to consider how time and project management are interrelated. Those interested in improving their time management skills can benefit greatly from learning the principles of project management. And whether you are the project manager or project team member, you should take the responsibility to understand and do your best to follow these principles.

WHERE TO START

A project starts with a specification. This is the definition of the project and includes, at the very least, a statement of the problem that the project hopes to solve. The wise project manager knows that the specification contains errors, ambiguities, and misdirections. Depending on the complexity of the project, the specification will change many times before the project is completed, and probably with increasing frequency as the deadline draws closer. Everyone who was involved in the creation of the specification or who will use the specification knows this, but will embrace some of its inaccuracies to the bitter end, fighting for the errors of his choice. One part of the specification that will not change, even if it's completely arbitrary, is the due date.

The project manager must call meetings, assemble all the project stakeholders, and review the specification point by point until everyone

has the same understanding (and it's in writing) of what is required, when it's required, and the cost. The time and effort spent in this initial step of project definition will save time later, and will protect careers. The project demands this effort and the project team deserves it.

A complex project may take months to complete, involve hundreds of people, dozens of suppliers, and has the potential to make or break an organization. So, spending time on getting it right the first time is understandable. But minor projects or tasks so small that they can't even be termed "projects," can and will benefit from the same initial definition step. If you or your team is responsible for a task and you don't have a clear idea of what your goal looks like, then you are doomed. You can go through all of the rest of the steps to reach your goal, but may miss it by a mile. At this stage you should look at:

- The big picture. Does this project make sense, and will the parts work when they're put together?
- Teams. If the project requires a team and particularly if it requires more than one, how will team members work together, communicate, divide or share responsibilities?
- Time. You have an end date, but the individual steps required have their own schedules. Are they achievable?
- Costs. Budgets are great until you exceed one, then various people become agitated to various degrees. Build in a cushion, the largest one you can get away with.
- Human resources. Teams can consist of consultants, hired help, freelancers, vendors, and others. They all need to play by the same game plan and be committed for the project to work.
- Other resources. Any materials and equipment necessary to do the work needs to be specified. If new software is required, for example, it will need to be purchased, installed, and may require training. Check that costs have been correctly estimated and time built in so the team is not expected to be using software before it has learned how, or hardware before it's installed.

Note, as mentioned above, that specifications will change. Someone will come up with a new idea, stroll into your office, and ask the innocent question: “Wouldn’t it be great if the project included. . . .” He or she will then proceed to describe a fabulous new feature or function that the original specification overlooked. Perhaps it would be great if the project included that feature or function. You may be as excited as your visitor about this idea and want to see it implemented in the worst way. Okay. Call the stakeholders, discuss and agree upon the change and its repercussions to the big picture, the team, time needed, additional resources needed, and costs. Get it in writing.

All of this may seem like a lot of work; it is. Invest the time up front. Look before you leap. You and the team will be glad later.

BUILDING A PROJECT FRAMEWORK

The next step in managing a project is determining what you actually need to do and how to do it. This is done by converting the specification into a set of tasks or activities. The activities need to be simple enough that they can be managed, linked to each other logically, and ordered. For simple projects, there may be only a few straightforward steps; for large projects, the steps may need to be broken down several times and the linking can become complex. The steps are descriptions in themselves, with instructions for the person who will be doing the work, and an estimate of the time involved.

This part of the planning process involves careful time management. Some steps can take place independently of others, but many will be linear and require one step to be completed before the next can begin. The same can be said of many tasks we undertake every day; we just are less formal in organizing them. We need to drop off the dry cleaning before we can pick it up, of course, and we may need to research information before we write a report. If we stopped to consider how much time it will take to perform the research, we would have a better idea of how long it will take to produce the report.

TASK ALLOCATION

The next stage is allocating the steps of the project to individuals in the project team. This often requires a global view; the manager needs to be aware of outside demands on team members, and most importantly, to take advantage of individual strengths and build skills within the team for future projects. Tasks can be modified to fit the experience of individuals, and grouped if they have common requirements. Task allocation is an opportunity to develop the team as a collection of individuals.

Time management is task management, whether for a project or for your own individual tasks. By thoroughly understanding a task, you can allocate the appropriate resources and schedule it accurately. If you are working with your own personal set of skills, you should be realistic in understanding how to take advantage of your strengths and accommodate your weaknesses to accomplish your goals.

TIME ESTIMATING

We've already seen how by breaking down a project into manageable steps, it's possible to assign them a schedule. Then, by putting together the steps into the longest path, you can get a good idea of the total time the project will require. There are lots of assumptions to be made and time estimating can be a scary process. It's important to keep records of how long individual activities take so you can use this experience in future projects.

If you don't have the results of previous projects to use in estimating the current one, then you're left with trying to guess time requirements as accurately as possible. It's tempting to be optimistic, ignoring potential or unknown problems, and assuming things will go smoothly. Problems have been known to occur in the best planned project, so it's wise to build in some slack so it doesn't blow your schedule out of the water. Your superiors may encourage you to deliver faster, and there may be honest business

reasons to do so, but resist the pressure to compromise quality or give unrealistic promises.

These principles apply equally to planning individual tasks. To successfully work your way through the day's to-do list, you need to know how much time each task will require, and be realistic in establishing your schedule. No matter how urgent they may be, or strong your desire to cross them off your list, you will not complete five three-hour tasks in an eight-hour day.

MANAGING THE PROJECT

Once the specifying, planning, task allocation, and time estimating is completed, it's time to pull the trigger on your project. It will be necessary to apply controls to the project, despite its apparent willingness to take on a life of its own. Because you have created steps or stages for a complex project, you know what needs to be accomplished and by what date. These milestones enable you to monitor progress (forming the basis for the popular "progress report") and serve as interim goals for the individuals or groups working assigned to them. Sometimes it's preferable to establish milestones that don't match the steps of the project, but recognize a particular achievement resulting from the completion of several steps.

Effective communication is a critical component of project management; it merits its own set of rules. The team must communicate with each other and their manager; if there are multiple teams, they must communicate with each other; and the project manager must communicate with senior management. Communications permit you to monitor and report progress, encourage cooperation, and motivate. Any breakdown in communications within the project management team can spell disaster.

Monitoring progress through milestones, particularly tasks with multiple steps, is an equally effective technique on a personal level. And as we've seen in the chapter on communications, your ability to communicate can be decisive in completing tasks.

QUALITY CONTROL

Depending on what the deliverable for the project is, some level of testing and quality control is typically involved during the project's life. If it's necessary, it should be planned for and scheduled as a part of the product's development. A proper specification will include the level of quality required.

You apply quality control to your own work, although typically it's an unconscious reflex. When you hand in a report, for example, you'll feel a certain sense of satisfaction based on its quality. If it was a rush job, you may feel relief that you made the deadline. If it represented your best work with quality research, lucid writing, and insightful conclusions, then you'll have a justified sense of pride. Different tasks require different levels of effort, and understanding this is an important lesson to learn.

SUMMARY

We haven't attempted to document all the steps of project management, but have tried to point out significant components and how they parallel management and particularly time management for the individual. Project management is an art and a science, but its principles, as we've seen, can apply beyond their formal application.

Project management provides opportunities and pitfalls that working solo can't. Whatever the outcome, it is always a learning experience for those involved in the project. It should be clear that better understanding of expectations and processes, greater cooperation and communication, additional commitment to the outcome, greater utility of resources, and of course, superior time management—signal better project management and better results.