

Our Top 10 List for Effective Project Management

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In today's world of first to market, Internet time, and the rapid growth being experienced by several dot.coms, it is even more seductive to abandon all best practices and simply try to "get it done". To curb this desire and avoid failure, I find it useful to continually refer to the following "Top 10 List" of key operating principles. Whether you're a CEO, VP of Development or a Project Manager, such a list can keep you on the straight and narrow path towards success.

1 - Clarify goals and schedule. All too often, especially when faced with dynamic business objectives, it is easy to lose site of the basic project goals. For instance, what is the relative merit of quality, timeliness or cost goals for your project? If you don't know, you can be sure that your team doesn't know either.

I have often found it useful to not only clarify the goals and schedule within a Vision document (refer to the Rational Unified Process for details), but to post it on the office walls for everyone to see. This can be as basic as a posterboard with "29 Days Until Product Launch" written on it or as complex as a task list with deadlines and ownership assigned. It seems to get the team member's attention when their name is "up in lights" with their deadlines on a posterboard, hanging outside the VP's office.

2 - Do not sacrifice the team. It is tempting, but do not agree to a project schedule that you are not comfortable with, even though you could win "praise" in the short term by agreeing to it. Rarely is the company in a true "death match" with the competition - usually either schedule, cost or feature set can be slightly sacrificed in return for a more realistic chance at delivering a quality product.

Also, do not believe that the development team's loyalty can be traded for their participation in a "death march" on an aggressive project. Quality will suffer. Trust will be lost. And most painful of all, your best team members will leave.

3 - Avoid turning project management into a project. Even on the most aggressive and demanding projects, I have seen junior project managers turn the management of the project into a project itself. If you are spending more time correcting Gantt charts than you are "walking the floor" and speaking with your team leaders, then you may be falling prey to this fatality as well.

I recommend using a sophisticated tool, such as Microsoft Project, at the start of a project to lay out the work breakdown structure, task list with dependencies, and individual milestones. This information and the associated analysis should be the foundation of the Project Plan and updated on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. To guide your everyday tasks, I recommend following a Task List, a Risk List, and weekly Status Reports.

The Task List should be kept simple - usually just a prioritized list of 20 or so tasks associated with the project that should be addressed during the week. Each task should be assigned an owner that has the responsibility for addressing the task. The tasks should be prioritized since rarely will you have the time to address 20 items each day.

The Risk List can be used to keep you abreast of each risk to the project, as well as to "soften" expectations that have been set by making other executives aware that this project is not a "walk in the park", and it can be used to highlight risks to team members, especially when a team member has the power to mitigate the risk. The Risk List is a simple list of the Top 10 risks to the project. If there are more than 10 serious potential risks - you might as well admit defeat now. Each risk should be quantified in terms of the relative impact to the project in the event that the risk is not avoided. This impact multiplied by the probability of occurrence, provides the "risk exposure" number, which serves as the relative priority of each risk. Each risk in the list should also be assigned an owner, with a plan of mitigation. Compiling the Risk List, communicating it to the team, and updating it frequently will mitigate many of the main risks to your project early, ensuring a successful project completion.

Weekly Status reports are often the bane of Project Management, serving as just more input into the "political jungle" of product development. However, if you keep the reports pure from politics and abide by a simple format, these reports can be a great time management tool for management of your project. By keeping the focus on "what has been accomplished", "what is to be accomplished", and the current "issues" (or risks from your Risk List), this report can help maintain your focus on the critical project items.

By keeping your Task List, Risk List, and Weekly Status Reports current, while updating the overall project plan on a less frequent basis, you will stay focused, keep from turning the project plan into a project, and have more time for communicating with your teams - something that can radically affect project success.

4 - Stay honest. Taking pride in your ownership of a project is a good thing, but beware of trying to "protect" the project by overstating your probability of success or hiding the risks that may tarnish your project. It is always better to "fess-up" to the risks or problems you are facing with the project - in fact, this is the first step to overcoming these risks. There is nothing to gain in attempting to hide the dangers - word will get out anyway. Your team members are smart - they will uncover your false statements and if so, lose respect for your authority. Your boss is also smart (I know this is hard to believe at times). You need his respect and you need to keep the authority and control of the project that he has given you - this demands that you always be truthful with others on the team as well as yourself.

5 - Keep trust and loyalty. Without control of the team, you will never be a successful project manager. Control demands dedication. Dedication demands both trust and loyalty. Without trust, no team member will listen to your advice, suggestions or "orders". Without loyalty, they will not care even if they happen to listen. It is imperative that you keep the trust of the teams reporting to you. Trust is a funny thing, once lost it can never be found.

6 - Communicate frequently. Your team members are making decisions constantly that affect your chance of a successful project completion. Each decision is based on their knowledge of the project and inherent assumptions. Frequent communication will ensure that each member of the team has the most up-to-date information. Even if you only have partial information, do not hesitate to share it with the team. Many times partial information is magnitudes better than no information or the wrong information. Also, frequent communications displays that you value their work on the project which in turns helps to build trust and loyalty. Depending on the nature of the project, you may choose to have every day or every other day meetings with the teams. Often these can be "stand up meetings" to minimize boredom and maximize attentiveness by streamlining the meeting.

7 - Collaborate on ideas. Do not expect, that as "owner" of the project, that every great idea or solution will originate with you. In fact, most of the best project leaders encourage collaboration from the teams when attempting to solve problems or avoid risks. Often the perspective gained from others will be the key to unlocking previously "unsolvable" risks.

8 - Promote innovation. Another aspect of collaboration is innovation. Publicly desiring and accepting other team member's solutions will spawn their thinking about the project. Instantly you may have turned a shortsighted developer into a developer that is also brainstorming at night on ways to increase the team's chance of success on the project. By doing this, you have evolved from a single processor (your brain) attempting to solve the project dilemmas to a multi-tasking, multi-processor (your brain combined with the team's brains) capable of mitigating the most horrendous project risks.

9 - Never let your guard down. You are the owner of the project. You must stay vigilant against risks to the project success. The reality is most projects fail. Yours is not protected simply because you are "smarter than all other project managers". Never let your guard down. I have seen project managers go from heroes one day to being fired the next day. Do not misinterpret a successful delivery of a single artifact as a successful project completion. Sure, celebrate each success with your team, but keep vigilant.

10 - Keep out of your office. During the normal workday, take advantage of the opportunity to "walk the floor" and to mingle with your team members. You will learn much more during casual conversations with your team than you ever will during formal meetings or by staying in your office to update the project plan.

Throughout my career, I have had the luxury of not only working with some of the best software development teams in the industry, but also of gaining their respect and loyalty. I believe that following a Top 10 List has been instrumental in acquiring this luxury and in successfully managing complex projects. I would recommend that you do the same and create your own Top 10 List to be used as a guide in your daily management of projects.

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