



SEVEN TACTICS TO INCREASE PROJECT SUCCESS

Edwin T. Cornelius III, Ph.D.

Whether you are about to undertake a six-week project or a three-year, multi-million dollar implementation, you will be faced with common issues—how do we ensure the project doesn't run behind schedule or over budget, will we be disorganized, will we suffer from poor leadership, will our project be as successful as we hope it will? From our experience we have gathered seven best-practice tactics to help institutions avoid these pitfalls.

TACTIC 1: CARRY OUT A PROJECT "READINESS ASSESSMENT"

This first tactic is best suited for institutions about to engage in a large project which involve big budgets and commitments that garner institutional resources for an extended period. With large projects, we recommend that institutions carry out a "readiness assessment" prior to beginning the project to evaluate the project plan, ensure it is realistic, and confirm it will be effective. Readiness Assessments are not conducted as often as they should be.

A "readiness assessment" is, in fact, a risk mitigation tool and can be invaluable in the planning of a multi-year, multi-million dollar project. The primary purposes for conducting a "readiness assessment" are:

1. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the institution to carry out the project
2. Use this information to improve the planning and management of the project to include the development of a project scope document, timeline, budget, communication plan, and training plan
3. Use this information as a starting point for a project risk analysis with preventative and contingent actions identified



Louis J. Sarasohn and Michael S. Luehlfing, "Project Management on the Fly – the Road to Nowhere"

AN EXAMPLE

To illustrate this approach, we will use an example of a multi-year, enterprise-wide software implementation project at a state university. The “readiness assessment” consisted of structured interviews with 68 individuals over a four-week period. Interviewees included a sample of the end-users of the new system, information technology personnel, university administrators, consultants from the software vendor, and contacts from other universities who had experience implementing the same software package.



The results of these interviews produced data that proved invaluable in developing a better plan for the project, a more realistic budget, and a different type of project organization than the one they were considering. One of the eye-opening results was a simple list of the top ten concerns expressed by the major stakeholders. This list was well received and was used to make changes in the proposed project organization, the communication plan, and the leadership composition of project sub-teams.

One of the most important results of this “readiness assessment” involved the budget assessment. As a result of this process, the budget was increased from \$4.7 million to a more realistic \$10.8 million. Educating the institution and alerting its leaders to a better cost estimate prior to beginning the project was less painful for the project team than if this discovery had been made in the middle of the project. Other important results included identifying critical needed interfaces ahead of time, developing a consensus for full-time project dedication of key people, constructing key elements of a communication plan and a training plan, and making appropriate changes in the project timeline. In short, this analysis better prepared the university to carry out this project successfully.

TACTIC 2: DEVELOP LOGIC-BASED PLANS, NOT DATE-DRIVEN PLANS

We are continually surprised that most project plans are still date-driven rather than logic- or dependency-driven. Date-driven plans are often misleading and do not allow for flexibility or troubleshooting. Institutions are missing an opportunity to maximize the potential of the powerful project management software that is available which allows for including task durations and dependency relationships among tasks. With logic-based plans and the help of today’s software, we are able to immediately see the impact of missed task deadlines on milestones that are still months away. As a result, the consequences of falling behind early in the schedule of a project are now known instantly for the life of the project. Another benefit of using logic-driven plans is that information about delays comes early enough for project compression interventions to have an effect. Widespread use of this tool alone will greatly increase the likelihood of project success.

TACTIC 3: SECURE OWNERSHIP OF THE PROJECT PLANS

Through the years we have learned the importance of ensuring all individual members of the project team support the project plans and project schedule. When there is group “ownership,” project team members are more likely to treat the plan and milestones more seriously and to put forth the necessary effort to ensure the work is completed.

The most effective way to achieve this ownership is to involve the entire project team when developing the plan. The project team members should identify the tasks and produce the work breakdown structure. If the entire team estimates the duration of tasks and rates the dependency relationships among the tasks, there is more understanding and ownership in the schedule that results. This is based on the simple theory that if a person helps create something, they feel ownership. In cases where one individual creates the plan in a vacuum, it is easy for the project team to claim the schedule is “unrealistic” as milestone dates approach rather than working hard to make a deadline that they themselves “own.”

TACTIC 4: INSIST ON SPECIFIC PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Project management surveys continue to cite poorly stated project objectives as a cause in ineffective project execution. With poorly stated objectives, it is sometimes difficult to determine when the project is complete, if it was a success, or if there is a clear strategy for accomplishing project objectives in the first place. In too many objective statements, cost, quality, and time parameters are not addressed or are inadequately stated.

As a simple illustration, let us look at a smaller project’s objectives. Listed below are three different expressions of objectives for a computing help desk project:

1. Improve our responsiveness to help tickets
2. Reduce the time it takes to respond to help tickets
3. Reduce the time it takes to respond to help tickets by a factor of 50 percent no later than May 1, 2011, within a budget of \$5,000

“In reality the majority of projects fail due to the lack of clear objectives and lack of appropriate scope management.”

Jody Bullen, “Making Project Management Work: A Critical Assessment of the Key Elements of Successful Project Management”

For many projects, the expression of project objectives is similar to statements one and two above. Objective two is a much better formulation than objective one; however, objective three is superior and should be the ultimate goal. Notice how increasing levels of specificity in the goal statement reduces the ambiguity about what is to be accomplished, by when, to what level of quality, and with what resources. When we follow the discipline of expressing project objectives in specific terms, there is no ambiguity about the three major drivers of most projects: time, cost, and quality. It is also a simple matter to determine if the project was successful.

Improving project objective statements is not overly complex, particularly on projects of smaller scope. Many times, it merely requires the discipline and time to state project objectives in specific terms with measurable results.

TACTIC 5: ADDRESS THE “SOFT ISSUES” OF TEAMWORK AND LEADERSHIP

In project management, there is a tendency to be focused on the technical issues of the project, the timeline, the project plan, the resources, budget, etc. But research shows that when projects fail, in most cases the problem can be traced back to leadership, lack of teamwork among departments in an institution, and other “soft” or cultural issues.

We recommend that teamwork and leadership become important aspects to consider and improve when trying to advance the success of your projects. In fact, in our “readiness assessment” (discussed earlier), leadership, teamwork, and team processes receive considerable weight in determining an organization’s ability to carry out a project successfully.

In terms of team processes, expertise in the following areas will help improve the likelihood of project success: effective team meeting skills, a structured group problem solving process, use of standard problem solving tools, good group decision-making skills, and conflict resolution skills. In terms of leadership, we believe that the project manager and sub-team leaders of large projects require a completely new set of leadership skills which include team facilitation skills, human relations skills, influencing skills, negotiation skills, and visionary leadership skills.

For large projects, we recommend the establishment of a formal development program to incorporate these group process skills and leadership skills. A program of this nature will not only improve project execution, but will also improve the talent of the organization as a whole.

TACTIC 6: GET BETTER AT COMMUNICATION



“Properly communicating on a project is a critical success factor for managing expectations of the customer and the stakeholders.”

The Ten Step Project Management Process, “6.0 Manage Communication”

Repeatedly in post-project assessments, project teams list communication as an area in need of improvement. In his book, *Leading Change*, John Kotter estimates that management under-communicates by a factor of ten or more on most change projects.

To improve project communication, we recommend constructing a Communication Table for the project. Using this device, major stakeholders are identified.

For each stakeholder, the following information should be developed:

- ◆ A list of the types of communications stakeholders must receive (what are we doing, why are we doing it, what is our role, do we need status reports and/or updates on project progress, a project timeline, team minutes, etc.)
- ◆ Who is responsible for the communication
- ◆ What communication methods we will use (email, web site, group meetings, one-on-one meetings, etc.)
- ◆ When the communication occur
- ◆ How frequently will we communicate the message

For more detail on creating a Project Communication Table, see our "[Project Communication Table](#)" Tool. The concept of a Communication Table is simple, and it is easy to construct. This tool is intended to help project team members understand their communication obligations while providing a plan to help then carry out the needed communication.

TACTIC 7: FOLLOW A SPECIFIC PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Our final suggestion is to faithfully follow a project management process. Most researchers agree that the use of any project management process can improve project performance by 5 to 15 percent.

A project management process is a roadmap of the steps in executing a professionally managed project. The major steps in a project management process are:

1. Select the project
2. Initialize the project
3. Develop critical issues and project organization structure
4. Develop a top tier, logic-driven, work breakdown structure
5. Complete project risk analysis
6. Develop detailed plans
7. Finalize project economics
8. Develop communications plan
9. Reach organizational consensus on scope, plan, and economics
10. Implement, track, and control
11. Close the project
12. Conduct post-project assessment

There is a consensus among professional project managers that a standardized approach to defining and executing projects is inextricably intertwined with project success.

We urge you to make use of these seven tactics to improve the execution of projects in your institution. These techniques, when implemented, will make managing projects easier, more successful, and more effective.

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