

Project Management or Project Manipulation

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Project

A project is defined by the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) as a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result.

Project Management

The PMBOK defines project management as the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques, to project activities to meet project requirements.

Manipulation

The American Heritage Dictionary defines manipulation as:

1. The act or practice of manipulating.
2. The state of being manipulated.
3. Shrewd or devious management, especially for one's own advantage.

With the evolution/revolution of technology it seems that we are always starting new projects. The list of reasons for these projects is endless, but most of the time it's because the hardware or software vendor is discontinuing support of the existing product.

Inevitably an organization will need help in managing a large scale project. This has created an entire profession that is focused on the successful delivery of technology based projects. Properly staffing these roles is not a luxury anymore. There have been many surveys over the last 10 years that attempt to determine the

success rate of IT projects. Respondents have stated that failure rates have ranged from 40% to 70% and average actual costs ranging from 125% to 190% of original budget. This means that approximately half of all projects fail and the ones that "succeed" are over budget. This is hardly encouraging. This data leads us to the question of why projects are doing so poorly. There are three main areas that can cause a project to fail. The first is the tool or technology being implemented. If the software is poor in quality or is more expensive to maintain than expected then the project could fail. The second area is the process being used to implement and use the tool. An email package is not valuable if employees continue to use interoffice mail only. In addition, if the user requirements are skipped in the implementation process then the solution will not fit the needs of the employees. The third area is the people that are implementing the tool. These are your project staff, which includes the Project Manager. The Project Manager is a relatively new professional that is constantly evolving. As stated earlier, properly filling these project roles is no longer a luxury but a necessity. Effective project managers need to be in place or your project is destined to fall in the majority of projects that are over budget, past due, or simple failures.

We can assume that the technology being implemented functions properly. If you have done your research and purchased a product from a reputable firm then this will not be a problem. If the tool did not work then all projects using that technology would fail and the company would soon be out of business. The next area that can lead to project failure is the processes used to implement the tool. Firms should have detailed processes on how projects will be implemented along with how to conduct daily business tasks. It is up to the people on the

project to utilize these processes and this technology correctly. While failure to adhere to documented processes can lead to project failure, a strong audit team will ensure adherence to proper procedure.

Therefore, we will turn our focus to the people involved in implementing these failing projects. Just as a CEO is ultimately responsible for what happens at a company, the Project Manager is ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the project. While there are many people who hold the title of Project Manager within their organization, not all of them can truly be called one. Depending on the organization, the culture and the size of the project, the project manager's role and authority can be dramatically different. Sometimes the project manager is similar to a weatherman – they only interpret and communicate the data, but will always be blamed for bad results with little credit for good performance. People in this role may hold the title of project manager but are not given the authority necessary to work in this role. Unfortunately, there are also employees who are given the proper authority but decide to abuse it for their own gain. These are the project manipulators who are even more detrimental to the company than a poor project manager.

By the end of this paper, the reader will have a good understanding of what constitutes a Project Manager and what constitutes a project manipulator. Avoiding these manipulators will not guarantee success, but it will greatly improve the chances for a successful project.

Project Managers

The project manager is the person responsible for getting the job done, for delivering the results

that management is expecting and the “go to” person for information on a project. This is not someone who is entering hours to a project plan, or ticking off tasks completed. This is the person (or persons) with the authority to make it happen. They have to be intricately involved with the mission of the project and the goals of the organization. They need to know the impact and effects that their project has on other projects.

As the definition at the beginning states, a project manager applies specific knowledge and skills in order to achieve project requirements. This knowledge includes project specific information as well as effective management techniques. The project manager must often lead the project staff while they are still directly responsible to their functional manager. This conflict of priorities can be confusing and frustrating for both the project manager and the staff member. Without the necessary management skills, the Project Manager will be ineffective. If we combine this definition with the survey results mentioned above we come to the realization that many projects lack real project management. Over half of all projects are considered a failure which means that there could not have been an effective project manager applying their skills and knowledge “to achieve project requirements.” This is not to say that every project failure is the fault of the project manager. With such a large number of failures, however, we must fix one area at a time. It is important to note that regardless of staffing there will always be a small portion of projects that fail for external reasons.

Project Manipulators

If projects are lacking Project Managers at the lead, then who is there? Unfortunately, the result

is often the project manipulators. These are people who are attempting to manage the project and the processes for their own gain. Their personal objectives are more important to them than the strategic objectives of the specific project or the company as a whole. This manipulation can range from simple laziness and ignorance to illegal activity. Some examples include withholding information from or providing incorrect information to the decision makers to avoid increased workloads. For example, in a weekly status report a project manipulator would indicate that there are no new risks to avoid researching the risks and managing them.

Some of the signs that you have a project manipulator running the project include:

- Status reports are not informative and timely
- Their terms and conditions are larger than the statement of work
- Their status meetings with key management are consistently in non-professional locations (restaurant, bar, etc.)
- Increased resources are routinely requested regardless of the type of problem identified
- Information is withheld that reveals problems with the current project
- They use their project position to their benefit at the expense of the sponsoring organization (expensive flights or hotels when company policy dictates otherwise, kickbacks from vendors, etc.)
- They state that the project is on budget and on schedule in every status report until go-live approaches and the true project status is discovered

For example, assume that you are sponsoring a project which has the goal of improving your

internal audits for governmental reporting. An expert is needed and two potential candidates are identified. The rate for both experts is higher than was originally budgeted for and, you worked with one of the experts on a past project and are good friends outside of work. Senior management has asked for an update on the project.

The project manipulator may do one of many things in this instance. First, they would fail to indicate the budget risk associated with the higher rates charged by the experts. As stated above, one of the most common signs that a project manipulator is running a project is if it is on budget and on schedule every week until you approach go-live. At that point it often becomes clear how far behind everything is. One of the most common examples of this is the project that is 95% done for several months. Second, the project manipulator might bring their friend onto the project without any real evaluation of which expert was more appropriate for the particular needs. Lastly, the project manipulator may even require some form of kick back, whether monetary or other, from the expert to let them into the project.

Unfortunately, by the time you realize that someone is a project manipulator it can be too late. Therefore, how does one recognize these people before they can negatively affect the project? There are several steps that will greatly improve your chances for finding the right candidate to manage a project. First, utilize your professional and personal network to find the person that you need. It does not matter whether you are looking for someone within your company or from an outside consulting firm. The value of a positive referral from someone you

trust cannot be overstated. Your contact will want to ensure they send you a qualified person because they know that part of their reputation with you is on the line. You would not risk sending them a recommendation for an unqualified candidate. If the candidate is internal then you should be able to review some of their past performance evaluations. If it is an external consulting firm then ask them to provide references for similar work that they have completed. This is particularly valuable because you will be able to assess how their work holds up after they have left.

Second, take the time to properly interview the candidate and ensure that they have an understanding of your business requirements and project needs. Too often on projects we only get permission to bring someone new in when the need is extremely urgent. The position has been needed for weeks (or months) and you are only now able to fill it. This can lead to quick decisions that have lasting detrimental effects to your project and company. You may not have weeks to get to know a candidate but you need to perform your due diligence. Ask the candidate to speak to at least two other staff or management resources related to the project. This person will be working with you for many weeks (and late nights if the project is experiencing problems) and it is important to find the right fit. If the project is currently experiencing set backs then ask the candidate how they would handle such a situation.

Third, accept that you may not currently have the expertise in house. Whether you need to hire a consulting firm or new full time employees it is important to understand when your current staff cannot handle the tasks. This is especially

true for complex or mission critical projects. Bringing in someone who has done similar work in the past, while meeting the first two criteria, will greatly improve the project success rate. If your projects are not currently complex then you may have the option to bring in outside help to train your people. This requires more time but is an investment in your employees that can improve overall performance and morale.

Lastly, there are various organizations that provide certifications in the general consulting field and the project management areas specifically. The Project Management Institute is one example. The key is to make sure that the certification process requires both experience and testing. This ensures that they have done this type of work before and are committed to increasing their knowledge of their profession. Not all certifications are worth considering, however. The ones to avoid only require the applicant to pass a test. The only thing this proves is that the candidate is able to memorize information for a specific period of time. It is not an indication of their true knowledge level or expertise.

Do you have a Project Manager or Project Manipulator working for you?

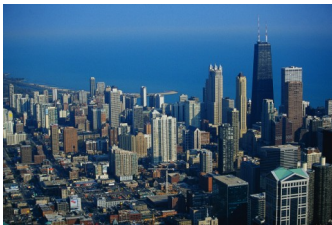
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