



## Take Project Management Seriously!

**Y**ou will never hear anyone say, "Project management is a bunch of bunk." We all agree to the tenants of delivering projects within a defined time frame, scope, and budget. And yet, very few institutions implement project management or develop project managers with the seriousness that reflects the challenging projects facing them. Instead, institutions often address project management with a casualness that belies the critical nature of these projects. We confront a mind-boggling onslaught of new technology initiatives, and yet staff are assigned project management duties without serious consideration of what is being asked. Frequently, project managers are chosen on the basis of their technical skills or their supervisory experience rather than on the basis of a solid track record of demonstrated project management experience.

Is this acceptable? It may be. But would you feel comfortable asking an Oracle programmer to program a network switch or asking a lead technician to take on human resource management duties? Then why are we so likely to appoint project managers who do not have specific project management experience?

### What Are the Required Skills of a Project Manager?

Good project managers do not spring from the earth fully grown! Good project managers are developed over time. They hone their skills and continue to add to their toolbox through their experiences. This is also how operational managers are developed, but with an important difference. Remember that

saying about the hammer? If the only tool you have is a hammer, then every task looks like a nail.

A good project manager's toolbox is filled with proven and reusable project management tools, as well as the skills to use them. These tools include the following: facilitation, contract negotiation, analysis, and communication skills; governance agreement, scope document, project plan, and project life-cycle models; requirement, budget, and RFP templates; risk-assessment tools; testing, communication, contingency, change management, quality assurance, and implementation plans; team role definitions; responsibility matrices.

A good project manager understands the dynamics of building temporary teams and has the skills to manage the issues characteristic of project team members. For example, members are often concerned about the jobs they may have left behind or about how they will satisfy a project manager as well as their supervisor. A good project manager works these issues out in a clear governance agreement, which is developed in collaboration with supervisors and team members.

A good project manager understands the importance of an engaged sponsor and uses his or her communication skills to keep the sponsor active in the project. The project manager knows that the sponsor defines all the project objectives. It then becomes the job of the project manager to help the team translate those objectives into a project plan with an appropriate life cycle, deliverables, and milestones. Once again, ex-

cellent communication, analytical, and facilitation skills are required.

You might notice that I have not discussed technical skills. I believe that a broad, but not necessarily deep, technical background is necessary. More important is the ability to use a broad technical background to understand and develop conceptual models. Technical gurus do not necessarily make the best project managers. In addition, who will serve as your technical guru if he or she is busy managing the project?

### When Is Formal Project Management Appropriate?

If your institution faces projects, or has a history of projects, that have the following characteristics, you may want to consider developing dedicated skilled project managers.

1. Operational managers are assigned as project managers with no consideration of backfilling for their ongoing responsibilities.
2. Project initiatives use more than one technology, and subject-matter expertise crosses organizational boundaries.
3. There is a lack of ownership and accountability in developing solutions.
4. Full assessment of risk rarely takes place, and risk-management plans are rarely implemented.
5. There is no formal accepted mechanism to join constituencies together to provide collaborative solutions.

Skilled project managers can develop, share, and reuse those best practices that are appropriate for an institution's culture. Operational managers do not have the time to do this after the completion of a project. They are too

busy managing the transition of projects to operations!

Professional project managers know that they are not the technical experts, and they know that the members of the project team must come from the expert groups. Operational managers, historically, have been successful by taking a local view, using their own resources, and narrowing scope within their own experience. There is nothing wrong with this; after all, that is why they were hired, and this is what they do best! But

whereby the probability and the severity of the impact of negative events are analyzed. A risk-management plan is developed, outlining a course of action for each event. The course of action for each probable event varies between ignoring the event to managing the event, based on the risk assessment.

Once implemented, formal project management slowly becomes part of the accepted culture of an institution. Team members learn what to expect and start to work together with ease. They be-

been established, the next step is to implement a Project Management Office. This can be a formalized unit or a virtual one. A Project Management Office promotes the sharing of best practices and tools among its members. It provides flexibility for backup on projects. It leaves operational managers free to focus on what they do best. It reinforces the concept that the members are professionals whose core competency is project management, and it elevates the visibility of these professionals among their colleagues.



this approach is not appropriate for projects that need to draw on experts from different groups and build collaborative solutions.

Team members from different groups may have a hard time developing solutions because of cultural differences. A project manager—a person who is from outside these groups, who can be viewed as objective, and who is skilled in facilitating differences in styles, philosophies, and opinions—can turn these groups into productive teams. Skilled project managers have models for defining the governance, sponsorship, authority, and accountability for a project and have the experience in using these models. As a result, all team members, from the executive manager to the person who produces the actual products, know their roles and responsibilities.

Skilled project managers have experience in performing risk assessments and implementing risk-management plans. Risk assessment is a process

come used to the idea of coming together in different combinations to solve problems. Project management becomes a formalized and endorsed mechanism for bringing constituencies temporarily together to develop and implement collaborative solutions that use multiple technologies and cross organizational boundaries—on time, on budget, and within scope.

### What Are the Next Steps?

There are several good training programs for project management. The Project Management Institute (<http://www.pmi.org/>) is the most widely recognized and offers certification. A few universities offer programs as well, including Stanford University, the University of Texas at Dallas, and George Washington University.

Prospective project managers should take courses and be given increasingly complex projects to perfect their skills. Mentoring is another method that can be used effectively with formal training.

Once a pool of project managers has

### Conclusion

Not everyone can be a good project manager. An institution should select and develop project managers on the same basis as other technical staff. Project managers should be given the right tools and the skills to use them. Lastly, a core group of project managers should staff a Project Management Office, leaving operational managers free to focus on their core competencies. Remember that project management is a profession requiring complex and time-honed skills. If you take your projects seriously, then you must also take project management seriously!

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