Essay Two: Project Management Strategy

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Abstract

Projects have a way of running off the rails if they are not properly managed. There are different reasons why this might occur, but it all boils down to the fact that stuff happens and change is inevitable. The project manager's task, then, is to be able to handle that change. This paper examines three different tools the project manager has at their disposal for helping keep the project on track. By setting a strategic plan, making good use of available tools and software, and being flexible, the project manager can increase the chances for the project's success.

Keywords: project management, project management strategy, objectives, organizational strategy

Introduction

If projects always (or even usually) went smoothly from start to finish, the profession of project manager would not exist. Instead, somebody on the team would be assigned the task of setting the plan, and then that person would carry out their regular duties as the plan hums along without guidance and without a hitch.

As it is, things go awry. Market conditions change. Team members come and go. Communications falters. Stakeholders change their minds. Technology glitches or otherwise doesn't pan out or, or a new development promises a better way forward. Whatever the reason, whatever the cause, projects need managers to keep everything on track. This essay explores three tactics to make that happen.

Develop a strategic plan

To keep a project on track, you have to have a strategy, and the best way to set a followable strategy is to create a strategic plan.

The strategic plan is not the same as the project plan. The project plan is a task list of sorts, laying out what work will be done, how, by whom, and when. The strategic plan, on the other hand, "is a high-level plan that identifies the tools and resources you'll use to deliver your project on time [and] on budget" (Workfront, n.d.). Specifically, Workfront says the strategic plan should cover four elements: communication (how it will work and who is involved), resources (including money, people, and assets), progress tracking, and reporting.

At a higher level, the strategic plan should list the project's objectives, and explain how those objectives serve the overarching goals of the organization, be that a department, a library, a corporation, etc.

It's important for the project manager to get stakeholder signoff on the strategic plan for accountability. As Searcy (2018) writes regarding sponsor signoff, a "signature confirms you're in this together" (p. 40). Visibility is similarly important as it lets everybody keep the strategic plan in mind throughout the project. Forbes Technology Council (2018) also recommends tying "the individual contributors' performance directly to the organization's goals with frequent progress reviews" as a way of motivating everyone to stick to the tasks most important to the project.

Use the right tools

Project management software is a great way to keep all team members aligned and working toward the same objectives. Searcy (2018) reminds us that "While project management software can be helpful with scheduling, it is only as good as what you tell it" (p. 73). The project manager can help keep the project on track by ensuring that everybody is diligent about keeping the system current—posting the latest documents, updating schedules, answering questions, and in general keeping their teammates up to date with the knowledge they need to do their own jobs effectively.

Templates are another way to streamline and standardize both the recording and the communication of information. Depending on the project, there might be online templates or internal templates from past projects that the team can use. During the strategy planning phase, the project manager or the team can customize the templates according to the project's needs. If there aren't any suitable existing templates, the team should create new ones for future projects.

Be flexible

Flexibility is a useful quality in general, but it's particularly handy when it comes to project management. Being flexible is not the same as being overly accommodating—the project manager's mission is to not to keep everybody happy, it's to ensure the project meets its objectives. What it does mean is the project manager must exercise good judgement about what and when to change.

Change is a part of any project, and thus so is change management. A good strategy can help here by identifying priorities. Knowing what is most important makes it easier to decide when the project manager can stand firm and when there's room for flexibility. It's also important to stay abreast of internal and external developments without overloading on data. Englund (2010) recommends, "Capture the minimum of data required to stay informed. Seek information that supports action-oriented decision-making."

Being flexible also means relinquishing a degree of control. A good project manager empowers teammates to make some decisions on their own. "Empower" here means giving teammates the information and parameters they need to make those decisions. This establishes a culture of trust and responsibility, leading to a stronger team and thus a stronger project.

Conclusion

Planning, software, and flexibility may seem like largely disparate tactics, to be exercised independently. What they have in common however is a strategic mindset. They all require that the project manager have a clear understanding of the vision of the project and how it ladders up to the greater organizational goals. With this in mind, the project manager can make informed and priority-based decisions that will improve the project's chances for success.

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