PM CONNECT

A quarterly newsletter that brings information on modern project management methods, practices and tools to the international development community

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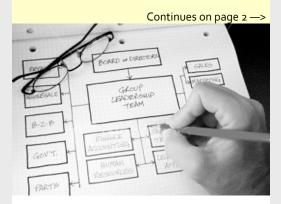
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2. How to Define a Project

One of the leading causes for project failure is poor definition. It is also the leading cause of scope creep.
Since the project plan reflects the work, resources, budget and schedule required to meet the scope, an accurate, realistic project definition is of critical importance.

There are seven essential elements that need to be included in the project definition:

- The definition of the problem and the solution.
- The measureable benefits of completing the project
- A concise definition of the project schedule, scope and budget.
- A list of the major deliverables, including what is in scope and out of scope for each.

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1. Resolving Project Issues

The definition of an issue is that it is a problem that will be detrimental to the success of the project and cannot be totally resolved by the project team. That definition leads you to understand that issues must be addressed quickly. If a problem is indeed being classified as an issue, the project manager must take responsibility for getting it resolved. The project manager should have an activity in the schedule every week to follow-up on open issues to ensure they are being diligently resolved.

By the same reasoning, if there is no urgency to resolve the issue or if the issue has been active for some time, you should look again to see if it really is an issue. It may be a potential problem (risk) or it may be an action item that needs to be resolved at some later point. Issues by their nature must be resolved with a sense of urgency.

When issues arise, they should be solved as quickly as possible. However, try to resolve the root cause of the issue, not just the symptom. Solving the root cause will ensure that the problem does not resurface later in the project. The root cause can usually be found by asking a series of 'why' questions. Why did the issue arise? When the question is answered, ask yourself 'why' again, and again. When you cannot answer the 'why' question again, you are probably close to the root cause.

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Updated version of Fundamentals of Project Management.
The second edition of Fundamentals of Project Management incorporates a new approach to learn the basic elements of project management in the development context. At the end of each chapter we have included a review section designed to go through the important lessons in the chapter, the answers to the questions can be found at the end of the book. The book also features updated graphs and additional diagrams to help readers understand the concepts presented throughout the book. Visit our web site for additional information.

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… *Project Issues, from page 1*

Sometimes issues arise that are hard to resolve not because of a lack of options, but because of the difficulty gaining approval and resolution among a number of alternatives. In other cases, you may have a number of options that are less than optimal, and the ultimate resolution may be one that is the least offensive.

An example of this dilemma is an issue that involves internal politics. Usually when a problem starts to get mixed up with internal politics, you will find that the resolution is difficult because there is more to the decision-making process than a cool examination of the facts. When a problem becomes political, in fact, a resolution may be approved that is actually far less than optimum for the project team. However, a less-than-perfect solution may be preferable to deadlock or the prospect of an even worse alternative approved.

In these situations, try to get the approvers to understand that a delay in the resolution decision usually does not make the result any more palatable. The project manager should strive to gain a resolution as quickly as possible so that the project can move forward. If the issue is political, the project manager will usually need to rely heavily on the sponsor and other management stakeholders to help in the resolution.

Ask Team Members to Identify Problems and Solutions
Issues can come from team members, clients or any project stakeholder. It is a good practice to encourage people to help identify solutions along with the issues. When a team member identifies a potential issue, ask them to bring one or more possible solutions.

This process will help build accountability among the team members, but it will also help determine possible courses of action. In fact, if a team member proposes one or more viable solutions, the problem may be able to be resolved with the help of the project manager and never reach the level of an issue at all.

…*Defining a Project , from page 1*

- A definition of the target beneficiaries of the project deliverables.
- A list of the project dependencies (internal and external)

These project definition components do not exclude other possibilities that can enhance understanding of the projects such as:

- A milestone schedule that documents interim deliverables requested by the donor.
- An impact statement that identifies what can or will be impacted by the project.
- Strategic risks analysis and contingency plans
- Project restrictions (environmental, political, cultural, and technological).

The project definition is part of the project charter and it can't be finalized without agreement from all key stakeholders, the project managers needs to make sure they review a draft of the project charter document and get their sign-offs before moving to the planning phase of the project.

It is also important that the project stakeholders understand that agreement with the project charter only means they all agree with the definition.

In order to commit to achieving the project's objectives, detailed bottoms-up planning needs to be completed by the subject matter experts who will be performing the project work.

It is only through this detailed planning that the project can confirm that the project definition is realistic and achievable.

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3. Estimating Time Accurately

Good project management requires an accurate estimation of the schedule estimated to complete a project. There are two basic good reasons for having the right estimates:

- The schedule estimates are the basis for setting the budget estimates
- The estimate set the deadlines for the delivery of the project outcomes which sets the expectations from donors and beneficiaries

Project managers often fail to consider the full complexity involved with a project and they underestimate the amount of time needed to implement it. This usually occurs when they are not familiar with the work that needs to be done and forget to take into account the time needed for unexpected events or unscheduled high priority work.

The first step in estimating time accurately is to fully understand what the project aims to achieve. This involves reviewing the tasks from the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) in detail so that there are no unknowns. The WBS is the best techniques to list all the tasks in a hierarchical order to identify all the work the project will do. Once the detailed list of all the tasks is completed, the project team needs to make a best guess at how long each task will take to complete. The project managers needs to ensure that within the estimate there is time for project management tasks and time for the following events:

- Accidents and emergencies
- project meetings
- Holidays and sickness from project team members
- Meetings with stakeholders, donors and beneficiaries
- Breakdowns in equipment, power failures
- Missed deliveries by suppliers or consultants
- Interruptions caused by social, political or natural events
- Donor audits

The above factors will cause an increase in the length of time needed to complete a project and should be taken in consideration when making changes or modification to the schedule. As the project makes progress it is a good practice to review the assumptions made for estimating the tasks and activities of the project. The initial assumptions may have changed, as conditions in the which forces the project to re-estimate

4. Applying Systems Thinking to Project Management

Development projects need to challenge their assumptions about the way they plan, implement and monitor their projects. They need to consider that projects do not function in an isolated environment but are heavily influenced by constant changes that make any plans irrelevant by the moment they are implemented. Systems thinking is an approach to see the whole picture rather than focusing on its individual components. It looks at the relationships and interdependencies among the different elements that make a project and seek to develop a holistic view, one in which change is a constant process rather than a series of snapshots taken during evaluations. The basis of systems thinking is seeing the system as a whole; it is seeing the forest rather than the trees.

The current approach of planning a project as a linear process is failing to take in consideration the importance of system dynamics and the interrelationships between the different components of a project and its environment. A linear process assumes that the conditions and assumptions upon which the project was designed (cause and effect analysis) will remain constant and continue to exists in the future, this could be valid for some types of projects were there is a high de-

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gree of certainty that conditions will not change; but the complex social dynamics that development projects are involved cause the assumptions to change constantly, factors such as economic, political, natural and human events make the project objectives moving targets difficult to achieve.

- The cause and effect relationships analyzed during the project design phase are not always linear; they are complex, unpredictable and constantly changing

- Planning is not static, it needs to evolve through incremental adaptations feed by the insights provided by the monitoring phase.

- Objectives need to be adjusted to new and emerging situations

- Interdependencies and interconnections among the internal and external components of a project are usually not taken into account.

- A feedback loop, a critical element for learning and adapting the project to meet the new challenges, is not incorporated in to the cultural fabric of the organization

Systems thinking allow a new perspective to understand the ability of external elements to influence the project and offers a broaden understanding of the complex changing environment that projects are involved. It forces projects to be more flexible and able to adapt to the future, especially to unforeseeable changes. It also helps understand the factors that contribute to the changes and the lessons that can be learned and used to adapt the project to its new environment.

Systems thinking highlights the importance of creating the time and space in the project for learning and adapting. Systems thinking require a better understanding of the internal and external environments, requires projects to build more flexibility to allow for changes and modifications to constantly fine tune the objectives to meet the real needs of the communities and beneficiaries and not solve symptoms or implement isolated solutions.

- You can lose a great deal of credibility by underestimating the length of time needed to implement a project. If you underestimate time, not only do you miss deadlines, you also put other project workers under unnecessary stress. Projects will become seriously unprofitable, and other tasks cannot be started.
- The first step towards making good time estimates is to fully understand the problem to be solved.
- You can then prepare a detailed list of tasks that must be achieved. This list should include all the administrative tasks and meetings you need to carry out as well as the work itself.
- Finally, allow time for all the expected and unexpected disruptions and delays to work that will inevitably happen.

These points of view provides a summary of themes, that in PM4DEV's experience, have proved critical in the successful implementation of project management methodologies. It draws on the expertise of project management professionals and provides a guide to deliver a methodology that increases the chances of project success. For more information about PM4DEV services and resources, please contact us at info@pm4dev.com

Paola L. Diaz
Director
paola.diaz@pm4dev.com

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