



Do you really know what you are doing?

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From Series of Articles Looking at the Challenges of Project Management and based on the premise that "If this was easy someone else would be doing it" ©MBF Consulting Services Inc

This article looks at the challenges of working on projects that might not have clearly defined requirements or when expectations and requirements are two different things.

We always like to believe we know what we are doing. In project management this is essential and more often than not it is a problem. Projects are provided with limited hand-off from the sponsor (conceptual stage) to the project manager (development/design stage). Assumptions are made, the project charter produced, scope is recorded and the plan is developed. The project aims to deliver to these specifications. The users, the stakeholders, even the market place etc may well turn round and tell you that it is not what they thought it would be. Hence the question - **Do you really know what you are doing?**

You have to ask yourself are you delivering the project to meet both specifications and expectations. It would be great if the detailed requirements, sometimes referred to as user specifications, are in fact the same as expectations. But, many times they are not. Simply put, it is likened to the review of art by the uninitiated. We have often heard the statement, "I don't know art, but I know what I like when I see it". Great, can they say what that is?

Requirements vs. Expectations

There are many times a world of difference between what was said is to be delivered and what is expected. It is not that anyone sets out to trick or mislead the project manager or the project team for that matter. It is sometimes as

simple as the person requesting the project does not know what they really want. But just like the "art critic" they will know what it is when it is delivered, or more often what it is not. Unfortunately, many times this results in something that is delivered exactly as requested, but fails to meet the user's needs or expectations.

To be successful these days, project managers must have a delivery mantra based on an "above and beyond" rule of thumb. They must deliver what is really required, what was implied was the need, or what had not been thought about, not what they were told was required! Welcome to the world of challenging project management.

The rules are in place. The excuses are ready and can play out – we did what we were asked to do. We defined the need in the project charter, the sponsor championed the direction, required sign-offs are held and we delivered to specification. But the project is still a failure. Why? Everything was done based on the requirements. The issue is that someone somewhere expected something different. Where were they during requirements gathering?

Projects fail - why?

We have statistics showing that a large portion of projects fail and a much larger percentage fail to meet the original requirements. The Standish Group published their findings in 2009 indicating that in North America only 32% of projects delivery on time, on budget and within expected results. The vast majority, some 44% were challenged, either delivering late, over budget or not to specification.

The remaining 24% fail completely and were cancelled prior to completion.

(Source Standish Group 2009).



So what should we do?

Run to PMI's Guide to the PMBOK™ and start applying what has been learned to pass the PMP exam? We should add more detail to the project charter and get a lawyer involved, so that we have a binding contract to deliver? We make the sponsor define the requirements and take no responsibility for the result? I don't think so. The true and frequently used answer for this is "it depends".

All projects have an element of risk, some more than others. That risk level determines the level of concern the project manager should have. Someone delivering a Microsoft Office upgrade to selection of computers is vastly different to a \$100 million pipeline delivery. Most of us have projects that fit somewhere in the middle of these opportunities.

Ultimately we may not get the specifications correct, we may get them close. So how do we deal with this uncertainty, the risk we have high-lighted and avoid being one of the 44% of projects that do not deliver to requirements?

Answer: It is as simple as A-B-C ☺.

A – Assess the situation

B – Build the requirements

C - Communicate

Assess

First determine the risk, for yourself, not just the project. Ask yourself - What are the chances this project will be easy or difficult to deliver? What could go wrong? What happens if there is a failure to deliver? Look at the positives too – do you have a good team, is your sponsor the champion or visionary? What is the culture like? If projects fail, does the organization conduct “witch hunts” or do they follow a lessons learned approach and build better projects in the future. Each answer determines what you do next and how detailed you need to get.

Build

We need to build the requirements. If by chance we have a great sponsor and this is the pet project, already championed through the steering committees then there is a good chance that the requirements are spelt out well. If not, they can be by simply asking the sponsor, who will likely enthusiastically talk about the project. The rest of us will need to dig and build based on knowledge gained from the sponsor, users and any stakeholder with an interest.

Spent time on this, assuming the project is important to the company and yourself.

There are methods for collecting the requirements – whether this is project checklists, interviews, brainstorming sessions with interested parties or full all-out joint application development sessions (JAD) where interested parties are locked away until they have defined what is required.

Ask questions, confirm needs, and find out who has an interest in the deliverable. Keep asking until you

are satisfied you have heard the requirements.

Communicate

The old mantra is – communicate, communicate, communicate!

It is two way – use listening skills as often as you can – twice as much as talking.

Be aware: things will change as the project continues. Make sure that you hear what the users, the sponsor or anyone else who may have an opinion has to say during the course of the project.

To help make sure that you hear these “changes” you must also communicate outward too - the progress of the project is the minimum. From the initial requirements as you understand them, through the plans on the actual deliverables. Keeping the stakeholders informed is the best way to find out if the project is “off track” or not.

One of the key parts of communication is the need to manage expectations. Hence communicate updates, issues, plans, schedules. No surprises are the aim.

Words of advice

Follow what has been said above, apply where you can and avoid the being complacent.

Be cautious of statements like “just deliver the results”, or accepting quantified results, without the definition of what is to be developed.

Projects that are defined solely by timeline and budget will be an issue. Scope must be captured, both what is in and what is not, and understood by all parties.

Make sure that the project has a purpose as well as objectives, and not just goals. The purpose should give you an insight as to the vision behind the project and can be very powerful in bring the team together. Simply put, the goals are

where we want to be, the objectives are the steps needed to get there.

Communicate with the stakeholders and ensure that what you think you are delivering is the same as what they think you are delivering.

AND always remember, as my tag line suggests, *If this was easy someone else would be doing it!*

Project Management is not for the faint of heart, it is challenging. But it can be hugely satisfying when you complete the project and demonstrate the fact that you **really do know what you are doing!**

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*As the President of **MBF Consulting Services Inc**, Michael provides many project management services including the practical application of the skills through customized courses and workshops such as - "**Practical Project Management for the non-Project Manager**"© His latest offering is **Value Added Project Management** ©.*

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