Project Management Best Practices

By Jeff Merron For IT Business Insider

The individual who was born to be a project manager is a rarity. If you've been given the title (and the responsibilities that go along with it), you may have had little or no prior training. Your expertise may be in traditional management or the specific subject matter or technical knowledge needed for the project at hand. Some quick studying, a little consulting and some common sense would probably allow you to muddle through the project management process.

But there are other actions you can take to be truly effective. The following represent best practices for meeting project challenges head on -- and emerging victorious.

Build a Solid Team
According to Scott Berkun, a former Microsoft program manager who's now a consultant based in Seattle, Wash., the best way to manage a project and complete it successfully is to select an "all-star" team. "You do always want stars -- provided they are stars that will fit with the team," he says. "If you can't find a star that fits the team, you want the best possible person that does fit."

But Jeff Davidson, executive director of the Breathing Space Institute in Chapel Hill, N.C., has a different view. "The best single measure to ensure that team members stay on track and on time is really to assemble a team composed of individuals who have a demonstrated history of doing just that," he says.

Chart Your Progress
In most cases, however, your team is assigned to you, and the best method for keeping a team on track -- and communicating clearly -- is to post a graph that shows project progress and has each person's progress charted in some way. This way, says Davidson, "everyone can look up on the chart and see what everyone else is doing."

But this method only works when the project manager has already plotted out realistic assessments of what each team member can offer, says Davidson. In this way, goals and milestones are achievable. *(article continues)*

Keep in Touch
According to Davidson, the project manager must meet with each team member on a regular basis to achieve this. Every team member must be asked what roadblocks they anticipate, if they're on track with goals and milestones, and what kind of support they need. "The onus is on the team member to ask for support, and to pick up the slack if they didn't ask for support and are creating a roadblock," he says.

A chart that plots the entire project "works so well that you don't have to even talk about needing to stay on track," Davidson says. He cautions that when working with talented people, project managers should be on the lookout for overconfidence, which may lead team members to understate the amount of time a task will take. The best method for addressing this tendency is to allocate about 25 percent more time than the team member(s) estimate. "If they think it's going to take ten hours, you should budget twelve-and-a-half hours," he says.

Create a Risk Plan
Rick Brenner of Chaco Canyon Consulting in Cambridge, Mass., argues that the key factor in developing a plan and ensuring that the team members will stay on track and on time is a good risk plan. A risk plan is an examination of what could go wrong during the project, and the costs in time and money to correct for those things.

"You hardly ever see one," says Brenner. "There's a certain reluctance to look at the dark side, and project managers are uncomfortable thinking about risk in general." The risk plan will, most importantly, factor in turnover effects -- the impact, for example, of unexpectedly needing to train new personnel or outsource tasks or positions. *(article continues)*

Achieve Consensus
David Maxfield, the vice president of research at Vitalsmarts in Provo, Utah, believes that communication is the key to a team's success, and it all starts with buy-in. "Everyone on the team must agree on and share the business case, and feel there's a clear business imperative," he says. Part of the agreement must also center around the roles of team members -- their responsibilities and the steps needed to complete their deliverables on time.

Davidson agrees that being in on the groundwork is key for participants. But how do you get buy-in? You may not, but you can get consensus on the project plan. "If you have one person who is reticent, you ask them to go along with you and when indicators emerge, you'll take action based on their forewarning," says Davidson. "You can even have a contingency plan."