



1 What is success?

When a major project is perceived as a failure, someone will take up the challenge the organization faces to avoid a repeat. This evaluation may be prompted by a new product or service being late to market, customer needs not being satisfied or even a realization that a large sum of money has been expended with little or no chance of any return on the investment made. The result could be a question of organizational survival in a highly competitive market environment if there is a succession of failures. The initial focus of the evaluation in such situations is nearly always the degree to which project management skills were understood and employed during the project time span. Then it is often seen that the project manager and the team have done all the right things at the right time within the project.

Yet something clearly went wrong somewhere and a wider view is taken to identify the cause. Then it becomes more obvious that project management competencies and skills alone are no guarantee of success. Many parts of any organization have a strong influence on every project initiated and an understanding of project management and the processes used must be part of everyone's learning today in all departments, not just the project team.

What happens to the project?

Someone identifies an opportunity for some new business, somewhere in the organization. A project team is assembled and a project manager assigned. The team may be assembled with individuals from all or just one or two of these departments. The Management Information System is designed to help run the business, not projects, yet this opportunity may be perceived by a few people as a vital element of future survival for the business. The project is conducted in a virtual envelope and when it looks as if it might have a 'successful outcome', the manufacturing department is informed. Then it is discovered that the project team made some wrong assumptions and capital expenditure is required. Perhaps forward manufacturing plans to meet the order book have no capacity to run tests and pilot samples for at least six months. The sales department get wind of what is happening and start shouting for the new product and major conflicts arise as every department highlights its own needs, to avoid making changes now and accommodate the project team. The consequence is demotivation of the project team, as no one appears to have clear responsibility for getting decisions made to promote the outputs from the project team.

How often does this type of situation develop with projects? This is a constant risk associated with project work if the projects in an organization are treated as something separate and disconnected with the normal day-to-day operations of the business.

How can this be corrected in the real world? The climate in which the projects are conducted has to be created with the active involvement of all the departments, some of which may initially think they have no part to play in the project. There are few projects in any organization today that do not involve, influence or affect many or all departments. Managers of these departments and the senior management of the organization cannot afford to risk ignoring the project activities that they consider do not affect them. They

may not initially see any linkage between their activities and the project, or consider the project is a waste of valuable money and resource effort. Or the project may become the pawn in a political game as managers individually express open support, cynicism or opposition to the project to fit their own personal agendas.

Defining success

Success is one of those words that conjure up a picture we paint in our minds. What sort of picture do you see for success? Is it huge financial gain, public recognition, promotion to senior management or just a great personal internalized feeling of achieving something you had initially determined was something to attain?

Your view of success

EXERCISE

Think about the projects you have either led as a project manager, in which you have been a team member or even those where you have been merely an uninvolved observer. Now try to put into words how you would describe a successful project: 'My idea of a successful project is characterized by...'

Comments

If we look in the dictionary for a definition of success we find it defined as 'attainment of object, or of wealth, fame or position' with synonyms such as victory, accomplishment, achievement, prosperity, attainment, fruition, winning. In a project environment this raises some questions:

- 1 Do any of these words appear in your description of the picture you have painted above?
- 2 For all those projects where you have some direct experience, how many fit your description?
- 3 Does the word 'customer' appear in your description of success?
- 4 Have you included some means of measuring a successful outcome?
- 5 Does your description include some measurement of time-related benefit?

Now ask some of your colleagues if their view is the same. Explore how their perception of success varies from your view. You will agree on some characteristics and differ on others because perceptions of success are driven by individual beliefs about what was expected as the outcomes from any project. If these expectations are not satisfied then the project is labelled as only a partial success. A partial success often becomes perceived as a failure just because some of these expectations were not satisfied. Ask some senior managers for their views on the same projects and discover if there is any variance with your view.

Success depends on who is measuring

Clearly the perception of success is dependent on who has established some metrics and is then making the measurements. All projects characteristically feature some specific roles:

- *The customer* – the 'purchaser' of the project outcomes or results. This individual may be internal or external to the organization and represent the 'end users' of these outcomes. The customer may be viewed as the individual who demanded the project initially or became engaged or involved after the project was completed. There may be several customers with different needs leading to a range of requirements for the project.

- *The sponsor* – the individual inside the organization who has accountability for the project. The sponsor drives the project in the right direction to benefit the organization.
- *The project manager* – the individual who has the day-to-day responsibility for the project work and is charged with completing this work on time, to an agreed budgeted cost and quality.
- *The project team* – the people who carry out all the tasks planned in the project schedule.
- *The resource managers* – the departmental managers who have direct responsibility for the people you seek to engage in your project team to complete the project work. These team members may be part-time on your project, work on other projects concurrently or be dedicated full-time to your project for a fixed time period.

Each of these individuals separately or collectively in groups has different reasons for qualifying and defining success. Conversely they can usually very quickly give you an opinion on failure or advise you what will lead to failure. Just how each can contribute to success or failure is key to your management of the project. As we examine each of the key steps to achieving success we will take a look at the actions you can take to avoid failure and enable a successful outcome.

What are the perceived causes of failure?

Many reasons are quoted for projects failing in organizations. Some of the more common reasons quoted, often in combination are given as:

- Poor definition of objectives at the outset.
- Inability to build a truly cross functional team.
- Lack of understanding of team member availability and capacity to do the work.

- Inadequate schedule management leading to schedule creep – elastic schedules.
- Weak leadership.
- Lack of senior management commitment.
- Minimizing complexity with consequent technical problems not resolved.
- Inability to anticipate problems.
- Poor planning and control – the feeling that planning is an unnatural act.
- Too many uncontrolled changes with consequent scope creep.
- Resistance to change.
- Inadequate resources.
- No effective communication process.
- Assumed knowledge, skills and experience of team members.
- Scope not clear or controlled as project progresses.
- Confused roles and responsibilities – who does what when?
- ‘I’ll do it my way’ (great song because my part’s okay, but lousy management).
- Titanic complex – ‘This project is sponsored by the MD and is unsinkable’ so no one is looking for icebergs!
- Speed is only for Formula One racing junkies – we’ll take as long as it takes.
- Over-optimism about time due to our innate ability to underestimate everything.
- All projects here are runaway trains – once started they just keep on going.
- We’ve done enough. Let’s declare victory and go home.
- We didn’t even have to involve the customers – we just told them after we finished.
- Success criteria? What are they?

Reduce the probability of failure

The watch for potential failure is a continuous activity that must be a responsibility of everyone involved not just the project manager. Risk management processes are an essential and integral part of project management and will help reduce the probability of failure. Creating the platinum version of the product or service is ambitious and often more complex. Of course the team are having fun, justifying their existence and sustaining their continued employment!

It is easy for the team to convince themselves that providing a feature rich product or service is obviously going to be seen by the customers as more beneficial eventually. In reality you continue to do this development with a high risk that a competitor will take the business well before your organization, reducing your potential market share. Grabbing a competitor's market share is never an easy path to follow. The reduction of the probability of failure must, therefore, take a wider view than just the internal activities of the team and their project work.

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