EXPERT SERIES

The "Expert Series" is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions' associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

What Makes a Good IT Project Manager: Five Keys for Success

by Bob Wourms

THE DEFINITION OF A "GOOD" IT PROJECT MANAGER IS A MOVING TARGET. As economic and business factors change, the role of project manager adapts to meet new needs and to solve new challenges.

Adding to the general confusion is the fact that a good project manager means different things to different people within the organization. To an employer, a good project manager is one who delivers projects on time and on budget. But to a member of the project team, a good project manager may be one who maintains a pleasant daily working environment (rather than one that careens from crisis to crisis).

Much has been written about the competencies of good project managers. Some focus on the "art" vs. the "science" of project management, while others differentiate between "leaders" and "managers." Both conclude that successful project managers need to strike a balance between the two. The art/leader side requires strong communication, vision, and interpersonal skills; the science/manager side requires detailed knowledge of methodology and tools, plus strong analysis and problem-solving skills. In the IT world, project managers must add to this an understanding of the technology being developed.

Whether viewed from an executive management or team member standpoint, the competencies of successful IT project managers fall into five main areas: Persuading key constituents to support the project, communicating openly with the team, motivating the team, adhering to standard methodologies and processes, and knowing the technology you're supporting.

Persuade Key Constituents to Support the Project

Without question, the most important competency of the project manager is the ability to communicate with others - in one-on-one sessions, in small groups, and before large audiences. In each of these situations, the project manager must be able to articulate the final vision of the product and sell its benefits to all constituents, including the end-user. Often, this involves using persuasive communication skills to convince the executive sponsor, the IT boss, the CFO, the project team members, the vendors, and anyone else involved in the project to take specific action or support a new process to reach the future vision. Without these persuasive skills, people would not be confident in the projected result, would question the direction set by the project manager, and would spend a considerable amount of time discussing the issues internally before making their own decision.

Communicate Openly With the Team

A successful project manager must possess strong listening skills, must be able to show empathy, and must be able to bestow recognition and praise on project team members. Issues crop up continuously throughout a project life cycle and can change the product scope, the schedule, and the cost, and can seriously impact the success or failure of the project. The project manager must be an active listener to anyone who verbalizes concerns. This will not only ensure the respect of the team, but will also provide early warning of problems that may lie ahead. While listening and communicating with others, the project manager should show empathy for what that individual or group is going through. It is important that the project manager understands the total environment and be able to restate that concern back to individual team members so they know that their concerns are being taken into consideration.

Motivate the Team

One of the most critical skills any project manager must have is the ability to motivate the staff. This is most effectively accomplished by giving recognition and praise to those who achieve their objectives. It's human nature to want to feel important; and people will usually put in the time and effort to accomplish a task if they know they will be commended in front of their peers.

Adhere to Standard Methodologies & Processes

In order to lead a project team, project managers must understand, follow, and enforce standard project management methodology and organizational processes. Knowledge of the Project Management Institute's Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide), Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) methodology, and organizational policies will help the project flow much smoother and be completed much faster.

It is also the responsibility of the project manager to ensure that all project team members understand and follow the standard processes. The importance of standards is easily understood - If every project manager had his/her own method, team members would be forced to squander time and effort as they learned yet another project manager's method. Likewise, the project manager could not depend on status reports from team members who had not yet mastered their particular technique. Without standard processes, the project manager could not identify the critical path, and would be at a severe disadvantage in allocating resources for upcoming phases of the project.

Know the Technology You're Supporting

Understanding the technology being utilized on a project, whether hardware or software, will provide the IT project manager with an advantage over those who don't understand it. There are many purists within the project management world who say that a good project manager can manage anything. However, there are many examples of IT project managers who lost control of a project because their technical leads provided erroneous information, such as unrealistic estimates, faulty reasons for falling behind schedule, requests for unneeded software, etc. Often, this happens simply because the project manager does not have the experience to know the difference.

This is not meant to imply that the project manager should be a technology expert, but that he/she should have sufficient knowledge to understand and question requests coming from the technical staff, and to evaluate whether estimates are reasonable. This technical understanding, along with solid communicatio skills, allows the IT project manager to explain technical issues to the non-technical members of the community, while gaining additional respect from the technical members.

By developing competencies in these five areas, IT project managers will be more likely to deliver quality products on time and on budget. In the process, they will also gain the trust of the project team, and effectively promote the end product to the user community and executive management.