

Achieve Project Success with Sponsorship and Clear Vision

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Industry Article

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According to the Gartner Institute, 50 percent of all projects are delivered late and/or over budget. We all know how difficult it is to achieve project success. Many things can hinder this success, such as little or no executive sponsorship, lack of project management support, unclear vision, no project plan or weak processes for handling change.

This article offers success factors to address common problems encountered when managing projects.

Success Factor 1 - Acquire Project Sponsorship

According to a Gartner Group study, lack of executive sponsorship is often a major contributor to project failures. One way to assure executive support is to clearly define roles before the project begins.

When roles are not assigned, project managers often feel responsible for the project's vision and scope, and can end up making decisions they shouldn't. Sponsors, on the other hand, should initiate projects and create charters, helping to ensure their involvement during project planning and execution.

Success Factor 2 - Support Project Management

Every organization conducts "projects," but the most successful ones follow a formal project management process. Here is a checklist to evaluate whether an organization fully supports project management as a function:

- Does a sponsor write a formal charter to begin projects?
- Does a formal process exist for selecting projects prior to the project initiation?
- Is there a prescribed method for executing the phases of a project?
- Are there reusable templates for planning, estimating, tracking, reporting and closing projects?

Project managers can work with executives to encourage them to demonstrate support by offering rewards for successfully managed projects. They can also encourage executives to identify risks and risk strategies throughout the project.

Success Factor 3 - Articulate and Link Business Need to Vision

When managing projects, if the core or underlying business problem is not clearly articulated, the right solution can be delivered for the wrong problem. Identifying the real need as part of project planning helps project managers ensure their project delivers value to customers.

The way to get at the real business need is by asking questions such as:

- What is the current situation?
- What is causing business pain?
- What are the business consequences or lost opportunities if the project doesn't take place?

As the project gets underway, assure that all components of the project are tied directly to both the project and business vision, as articulated by the sponsor.

Success Factor 4 - Define A Clear Project Plan

A common project management pitfall is not taking the time to develop tasks and timelines at the beginning of a project. Usually this occurs when a sponsor or boss says, "Here's what we want--when can you get it done?" Or worse yet: "Here's what we want and it needs to be done in three months." Who has time to plan and document requirements under this type of pressure?

It is critical to identify and document project deliverables, tasks, ownership and time frames of the project prior to project initiation.

Success Factor 5 - Match Changes to Vision

The project vision is critical to its success. Without project vision, managing inevitable changes is difficult.

Good project management requires stakeholders to agree and sign off on all project change requests. The stakeholders should be required to tie change requests to the overall project vision. If requests not linked to the vision are included in the project, the scope of the project has begun to creep.

Of course the sponsor, not the project manager, has final decision on changes. This brings us back to the vision: Vision gives impetus to doing projects in the first place. Vision drives the project plan. And, vision can help guide the project along on its way through changes that occur, without sidetracking or derailing the project.

In summary, projects are successful for many reasons. There are no "magic ingredients." But sponsorship, project management support, clear vision, a clear project plan and successfully handling change are five of the major factors attributing to project success.

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