Four Keys To Successful Project Management

By Raven Young

One question I get asked a lot is, "what does it take to be a successful project manager?" It's as if there's a secret recipe for being successful in the field of project management. Some would argue that nothing but experience counts; others favour formal training and certifications. Perhaps the best answer is to have a balance of both real-world experience and training.

But still, what does it take to make it in the world of project management? Why do some folks fall right into the groove where others struggle and gasp for air? Though there are a whole host of skills, knowledge areas, methodologies, etc. to consider, I think being a successful PM comes down to your ability to do a few key things really, really well:

- Communicate
- Organise
- Solve Problems/Make Decisions
- Build Good Teams

Communicate Effectively

Communication is critical to project management and a skill any successful project manager has mastered. It's important to note that communication doesn't mean "talking" or even "presenting." Communication is about transferring knowledge, sharing ideas, solving problems and providing new or updated information. Yes, we speak (and write) in order to communicate, but to master this skill we need to look deeper.

A PM should be able to communicate effectively in written form whether writing e-mails or producing project documentation, plans, specifications, reports, agendas, status updates and such. Equally important is the ability to verbalise your thoughts and get important points across clearly. Whether your audience is your project team, executive staff, external customers, etc., you need to be able to communicate your ideas and ensure they are understood, rather than simply heard.

The bottom line is this: If you can't get your project team to buy into your ideas, if you can't produce high quality written documentation and get the right information to the right people at the right time, you probably aren't as successful as you could be. Take note and work on your communication skills, it's arguably the most important skill needed as a project manager!

Organise and Juggle

In order to be successful in project management you need to be able to keep track of multiple "things" (projects, people, reports, requirements, specs, etc.). To do this you need to be organised, thorough, meticulous, and a pretty good juggler.

As a PM you need to keep track of your project team, progress, numerous project documents, the flow of information (right info, right people, right time, remember?), changes to the project (scope, schedule, features, plan, issues, etc.), and much more. If you aren't able to multi-task in this manner, to really keep things on track in an organised manner, you might find yourself in a state of overwhelm.

If being/staying organised is a problem area for you, try making checklists to help you remember where you are at in a given project cycle, what's next and, more importantly, what is going on. If you as the project manager are not clear on the state of the project or what the next steps are, how successful can you be?
Solve Problems and Make Decisions

A good project manager should be able to keep the big picture in mind, while also working on the details and specifics. This will allow you to be better prepared when problems arise (and they will) as you'll be aware of them sooner, and able to tackle the issues more quickly.

Is this a problem area for you? Work at really analysing a problem, research it thoroughly, compile a list of at least three alternative solutions and then determine the best course of action and make the decision.

At some point you have to rely on the information presented and make a choice to do A, B or C. When trying to solve an issue remember to focus on the problem you are trying to solve and your options, and hopefully you won't get too lost in the forest or the trees (big picture vs. small picture).

Build Good Teams

Your project team defines your success. We don't always have a choice in who is on our team, but we can choose how to manage, develop and get good stuff out of them. Building high performing teams is often overlooked as an important strength for project managers, which seems a little wacky, considering how vital your team is to the success of your project and you as the PM. The time and energy you spend engaging and motivating your team to perform at a high level is worth all the effort.

How do you motivate and engage a project team to perform at a high level? Have a solid vision that you can mobilise the team around. Give them a clear picture of the expected outcome, and you can empower them to build their own path to success. Engage them in dialogue. Ask them how they feel about the project, their role, its charter, etc. Show them where their contribution matters. Listen to them, cheerlead for them, challenge them, and build trust.

Is that all it takes to be a successful project manager? Of course not. This is a short list with a lot of detail missing, including best practices, certifications, and much more. However, these four skills establish a solid foundation that a PM can continue to enhance with work experience, continuous learning, and personal development.

Raven Young is a Project Management Consultant who runs a PM-focused blog called Raven’s Brain. There you will find her latest thoughts on all things project management, as well as other business centric topics such as leadership, professional development, personal growth, communication essentials, trust and more.

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