15 Principles of Project Management Success

Project management knowledge, tools and processes are not enough to make your project succeed. You need to get away from your desk and get your hands dirty. Liaise with the team, users and stakeholders and actively focus them on the objectives and outcomes of the project. Work to remove blockages and build effective personal relationships.

One of the worst things you can do is to assume that everything is ok; that product quality will come automatically and that your team is happily motivated. Instead you need to be positively skeptical and constantly ask if you have proof that something is working well. Be proactive and investigate the true state of your project. Ask yourself the following questions;

- How do I know that my team is motivated and fully embraces the objectives of the project?
- How do I know that what we are developing is what the users want and need?
- How do I know that risks are being effectively identified and mitigated?
- How do I know that my customer is happy with the way the project is progressing?
- How do I know that we will hit the projected deadline and that the project will be within budget?

To become a highly valued and truly successful project management leader you need to adopt a curious and positive mindset, and you need to keep your finger on the pulse at all times.

Exercise …

Think about a project you have been involved in and which worked out really well.

1. Which factors contributed the most to its success?

2. Which tools, technique, talents, and abilities did you successfully make use of?

3. Compile a list of the 10 most important things that matter to project success.

Below, I have summarized some of the things which contribute the most to successful project delivery. Read through them and make a note of the principles which you could start to make more use of to increase project control and therefore the value of your role. For each of the principles, rate yourself as to how good you are at making use of it today.
Whereas most of the items below are directly under your control as a project manager, some of them are not. Where you do not have direct control, you need to make use of your ability to maneuver and influence others in order to see a resolution. This could be the case when it comes to buy-in from senior stakeholders, organizational hiring policies or line management of your project staff. These are areas and situations which you may not be directly responsible for but which you can to some extent influence.

The main guiding principles for project management success are as following:

1. **Begin with the end in mind.** To be able to successfully deliver a project you must know what the project’s end game is. Check that the project has a valid and sound business case, define scope and really feel the end product and its purpose. Identify the main stakeholders and uncover how the benefits will impact each of them. Investigate if any of the existing business processes need to change as result of your project and clarify what needs to happen in order for the end product to be successfully transitioned into the client’s business. In many instances the business case will have been written by a senior executive before you get involved in the project. But although you may not be the owner of it, it is your obligation to make sure that it exists and that it is fit for purpose. Ask to see it and query it if you feel it is too weak. Never lose sight of the end goal. Get agreement from the stakeholders as to how you define and measure it and check back that the products you plan to deliver at each stage of the project will actually fulfill the business needs and provide the expected benefits.

2. **Win the support of your stakeholders.** To deliver a project effectively and successfully, the project sponsor and steering committee must have the authority to determine the project’s direction and to approve project deliverables, spend and resources. They must live up to this responsibility by being active participants who provide support and guidance when needed. Build strong relationships with your stakeholders and win their support by spending time with each person individually, understanding their concerns and viewpoints. Provide them with the information they need and in a format they want.

   “Provide your stakeholders with regular project updates and never be afraid to disclose risks or issues, or ask for help. The true test of a confident project manager is someone who has the courage to be open and ask for help.”

   Involve your stakeholders as much as you can and hold them accountable for actions they take on. Ask them to help define and sign off key deliverables and to make decisions and resolve urgent issues that you cannot handle on your own. When you involve your stakeholders and make them take ownership they become part of the solution. They will feel responsible and do everything they can to make the project succeed.

3. **Understand and focus on project success criteria.** Project success often means that products must be delivered on time, within budget and to a level of quality that is acceptable to the client. It is essential for you to establish what the project’s success criteria are and keep the team’s attention focused on achieving
them. You must understand which parameters and constraints apply to the project and how they break down to each stage of the project and for go live. Put yourself in the shoes of each stakeholder and investigate what it would take for each of them to say that the project was a success at each major stage. Check back to see that there is congruence between what each stakeholder says and what your measurable objectives are. Not all success criteria can be top priority so ask the project sponsor to set clear priorities.

4. **Focus on product quality.** The key to successful delivery and quality management is to carefully define scope, detailed requirements and acceptance criteria by liaising closely with the end users and to continually check that the products you are developing match these criteria. Establish a close working relationship with the client and users and keep them involved throughout the project. Create a comprehensive picture of the finished deliverables which everyone agrees to so that all efforts are focused in the same direction. Avoid vague descriptions at all costs; clarify using requirements documents and picture it using models and storyboards. Prototype, demonstrate and make sure everyone agrees with what you have defined. When everyone knows what the finished deliverables look like, plan to carry out comprehensive tests involving independent testers, if possible, as well as end users. Test and verify functionality continuously throughout the project and make sure you have time set aside in your schedule for rework after each test activity.

5. **Get the best people involved and nurture your team.** Delivering a successful project is heavily dependent on having a successful team. Acquire the most driven, experienced and best qualified people and focus on making them thrive. Value them, protect them from internal politics and give them the training, tools and working conditions they need to apply their talents. Find out what motivates each individual and find a way to tap into their hidden potential. Cross train staff, facilitate knowledge sharing and have succession planning in place. Ring fence resources where possible so that you do not have to share them with other projects. If your team members are working on several projects, fight for their time and get senior managers to actively set project priorities to avoid conflict. Nurture the team and make sure that working on the project is a worthwhile experience.

6. **Be proactive in the identification and resolution of risks and issues.** In order to deliver your project as effectively as possible, you need to stay on top of risks and issues so that they do not get out of hand and inadvertently affect quality, time and cost. The importance of this part of your job cannot be overemphasized. Be proactive and determined to continuously identify and mitigate risks by spending time with each team member and stakeholder. Ask them what is worrying them and play out different scenarios and brainstorm things that could jeopardize the success of the project. Carry out root cause and impact analysis and brainstorm options for how you can best move forward. Secure the buy-in and support from your stakeholders and ask for guidance and direction when you need it. Some problems can only be resolved at a steering committee level, so do not hesitate to provide visibility to executives. Always encourage open and honest communications without assigning blame for issues that arise.

7. **Deliver tangible benefits gradually.** On many projects, your chances of success will be greater the earlier you start to deliver real benefits to the sponsor and end users. The traditional way of delivering a project can be risky as products are only tested and delivered towards the end of the project. If applicable, use an iterative approach which somewhat reverses this pattern and
enables you to build, test and deliver functionality gradually. Break up a large project into smaller projects or phases with clear milestones and deliverables. Focus on the highest value and highest risk items first. Plan for early successes and track your milestones frequently. You want to have fast moving deliverables and experiencing the reward of hitting smaller milestones. Also bear in mind that delivering good news about project progress is something which should be delivered gradually. Instead of having a lot of positive reports one month and nothing the next, consider managing the flow of positive information so that there is always a little piece of good news to report on.

8. **Provide good estimates and build sufficient contingency into the schedule.**

As we have touched upon previously it is essential to project success that your project starts off on the right foot and that you have a good understanding of how much it is likely to cost and how long it is likely to take to complete. Use a variety of estimation techniques and tools and involve team members and senior managers in the estimation process. Break items into as much detail as possible as this will make it easier for you to provide accurate estimates. Make sure you factor in all phases, roles and activities and build in sufficient contingency. When you convert your estimates of effort into actual man hours of duration make sure you account for the fact that no team is ever 100% effective. Push back on sponsors and managers who want you to commit to a delivery date which is not feasible. Instead, provide best case and worst case costs and dates as opposed to just one figure. This will give you more leeway and increase you chances of delivering within the agreed parameters.

9. **Have realistic, transparent and up-to-date plans.** Regardless of whether you use a traditional or more iterative project methodology, realistic and up to date project planning is a must if you want to succeed. An effective project plan must be based on clear requirements and sound estimates. It should explain, in plain English, what is to be accomplished and delivered, which methods and resources will be used, how quality will be measured and when the products will be delivered. The plan should contain frequent milestones which are being tracked and reported on and allow for gradual delivery of benefits to the users. The planning process must be continuous throughout the project and adjusted to account for progress and approved changes to scope. If applicable, keep a detailed plan of work for the near future and an outlined plan for the far future. There may be little point planning in detail for what will happen in three months time as things will change. Use a broad brush to plan ahead and adjust and add more detail as you move forward. Involve the entire team in the planning process and make sure everyone has access to the plans. It adds little value having a perfect plan if no one knows about it.

10. **Provide metrics and honest project reporting.** Metrics are vital indicators when it comes to keeping projects on course. They enable you to report on project progress in an accurate manner and help you spot trends that you could otherwise overlook. Key metrics include *cost ratio*, where you measure actual costs versus planned costs, and *effort ratio*, where you measure actual progress (or effort) versus planned progress. These metrics (often referred to as earned value) let you know where you are versus where you should have been. Also compare your cost metrics to your effort metrics to see if you are making progress at the same rate as you are spending money. However, the two do not necessarily need to line up exactly. Always include these metrics in your status reports along with an honest view of current risks and issues. At steering committee meetings make sure you highlight problem areas in order that your stakeholders can help you resolve them.
11. Establish clear controls and sign off points. In order to successfully manage your project it is important that you establish clear controls for effectively managing cost, time and quality. Make sure invoices and timesheets are signed off and costs are accurately tracked. Get your stakeholders to sign off on the project charter and ensure requirements specifications are signed off before development begins. Have a clear process for prioritizing, planning and assigning new work items and never assume a task has been completed until its quality has been independently verified and signed off. If you run an agile project, have clear start and end points for your iterations. Clearly define sign-off points between various project phases and make sure everyone knows what the criteria are for closing down one stage and moving to the next. For recurring tasks and activities, develop checklists, templates and lightweight procedures to help your team better complete the work.

12. Monitor and control changes. To manage a project well, you must embrace and control change at all levels. Circumstances external to the project change, users’ needs change, dependencies change and people change jobs. When something changes do not resist it; analyze the cause and the impact of the change on quality, cost and time. Log all change requests and never start any material new work until the steering committee has approved it. The reason why it is so important to stay on top of changes is that the contract or baseline (as documented in the project charter) for what you have committed to delivering needs to be aligned to what you are actually delivering. Renegotiate the contract (i.e. the parameters in the project charter) when material changes occur even if you feel uncomfortable doing so.

13. Focus on project organization and communication. In order for a project to have the best chances of succeeding you must establish and formalize roles and responsibilities and communicate to everyone in an effective manner. Make it clear to team members and stakeholders what their role is and what is expected from them. Also clarify the purpose of key forums such as the steering committee so that your sponsor and senior stakeholders are able to live up to their assigned responsibilities. Write a communication plan which pinpoints the different types of project information, who it will be circulated to and how often. Base it on actual feedback from your team and stakeholders so that you can tailor your communication to their individual needs.

14. Continuously review and improve your approach. Highly valued and truly successful project management leaders continuously seek to improve the way they run their projects. Regular project reviews provide an opportunity for you and your team to reflect on how the last iteration or phase went; what worked well and what you need to improve on going forward. Review your tools, techniques and processes and how you interact with one another. Look at the project’s success criteria. Are you within budget, are you on time and is the quality of your products as expected? Create a climate in which team members feel safe to report how they think the project is being run and managed. Encourage honest feedback and listen to comments and new ideas with an open mind. Be careful these reviews do not become a forum for assigning blame for previous problems. Keep asking “what can we learn from our mistakes and what can we do to avoid this problem going forward?” Also seek feedback from the sponsor, end users and senior stakeholders. Carry out the last review when you close down the project and write up a report on your findings. Circulate it to senior management to help improve project delivery going forward.
15. **Be the best you can in all that you do.** To be a truly successful project manager you must love what you do and strive to set a great personal example for others to follow. When you are passionate, positive and proactive others will notice your example and want to follow. Strive for personal effectiveness and consistently focus on those things that matter the most to the wellbeing of your team and to the success of your project. Remember that less is more, so keep things simple where you can. Delegate tasks that will help grow and motivate others and give people the support they need to succeed. Make decisions which are consistent and well thought through and which are based on analysis rather than consensus. Be proactive in the identification and resolution of risks and issues and think of yourself as the project’s champion and ambassador. Maintain a positive mental attitude and never make a commitment you cannot keep. Be honest and approachable and always treat others the way you want to be treated yourself.

**Questions ...**

- Which of the above principles of success have contributed to most to your project achievements in the past?
- Which of the above principles do you need to make more use of in your daily work?
- How can you start implementing them?