Areas of Expertise for a Project Manager

Jyothi Goudar

Overview

The Project Manager is responsible for managing the project to meet the project objectives. A project is successful only if it meets all of it objectives completely. Most Project Managers do not realize that they are lacking knowledge of what good Project Management involves and why it is so important. Many people with the title Project Managers are not real Project Managers but some form of Project Coordinator.

A project Manager should be a role model for others to follow. Project management by a Project Manager is about focusing everyone on a goal, and managing the resources and workload to achieve that goal. All this happens in a high stress, deadline driven environment. Project Managers must be effective in:

- Communicating and getting decisions formed

- Implement these decisions vertically up and down the hierarchy of the organization

- Crossing organizational boundaries to obtain support

Projects require trained professionals with project management expertise.

Areas of Expertise

A PM is in charge of the project and its activities, but not necessarily its resources. It is important to realize that a Project Manager can successfully manage a project whether or not he/she has relevant technical knowledge. Many are under the notion that a Project Manager should be strong in his technical knowledge.

This is **NOT** true!

The Project Manager should make sure the team understands the scope of the project and then check the quality of the deliverables to make sure that the team delivers a quality product with the required features. Project Managers should be self-motivated and must have strong people management and interpersonal skills and general management skills such as leadership, negotiating, team building, motivating, problem-solving and mentoring. They should also be an effective communicator.

The following are skills a good Project Manager should posess.

Project Planning

A Project Manager creates and directs the project planning efforts. Project planning will specify the goals and deliverables of the project and the major activities that will be performed to achieve those goals. It will include the assumptions and trade-off decisions that will be made and identify major risks.

Project Manager should be good at scheduling, prioritizing and assigning tasks to the team members. A project with unrealistic schedule is a Project Manager's fault and should he or she should know how to handle the situation.

Good Project Managers know that they must involve team members when estimating the activities of the project. Without involving the team members he or she cannot

hold them accountable if the deadlines are not met. They cannot be responsible for somebody else's estimation. Applying padding to estimates is a bad practice.

A Project Manager should do risk planning and schedule planning effectively. Scheduling and estimating is the process of turning a well-formed project vision into a complete statement of the work, and its duration and resource needs over time. Estimating work and managing schedules is a project management core competency. It is also the primary source of conflict in project management.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable in a project setting, and conflict resolution is part of a project manager's core responsibilities. But conflict resolution is more than just refereeing disputes. The root causes of conflict in a project setting are largely due to flaws in the project plan, process or organization.

These project "issues" need to be:

- Recognized
- Captured
- Remembered
- Prioritized
- Resolved

in a systematic manner in order to minimize conflict in your project.

The Project Manager should work towards avoiding work related conflicts in projects. This can be done thru the following techniques:

- Inform the team exactly where the project is headed
- Clearly define project constraints and explain project objectives
- Document project parameters in the contents of the project charter
- Communicate all key decisions and changes
- Clearly assign work without ambiguity and overlapping responsibilities
- Make work assignment interesting and challenging

There are also positive conflicts that can bring greater efficiency in the way of working. The key to manage conflicts is to support the right attitudes with a good amount of competency.

Guiding the Team

The Project Manager should guide the team members in:

- Listing all the activities
- Identifying task dependencies
- Sequence the dependencies
- Create milestones
- Estimate duration for each activity
- Identify risks

- Document risk response strategies to lessen or avoid risks for the project

Project Managers should explain the Risk Management process to their team during project planning.

Milestones and Dependencies

Milestones help track project progress since they are significant events within the project schedule. They can be used as checkpoints to help control the project.

Engaging in a dependency discussion is the logical next step after the tasks are defined because this often has a major impact on the task definition and breakdown. It also acts as a communication stimulus among the team to better understand their inter-relationships and dependencies.

Dependency work usually results in some repartitioning of the tasks, so this process may be done iteratively with the preceding work breakdown efforts. The Project Manager should plan and follow-through projects to ensure profitable timely and high-quality completion.

Estimating Time

Accurate time estimation is a skill essential for a good Project Manager. It is important to get time estimates right. This can be done by preparing a detailed list of tasks that must be completed. This list should include all the administrative tasks and meetings that need to be carried out as well as the work itself. Finally, allow time for all the expected and unexpected disruptions and delays to work that will inevitably happen.

He or she should optimize a Project Plan after the first pass Base Schedule has been developed and it is iterative with respect to other planning processes; it is likely to cause task definitions, ownership, and dependencies to be redefined. Once scheduling activities have been applied to a task list to create a base schedule, apply the optimization activities to align the schedule with the overall project goals.

Scope Estimation

The establishment of the scope of the project is critical to the success of the project. Without scope being established - and more importantly, agreed amongst the key stakeholders - a project cannot be focussed. A Project Manager should know how to manage scope and guide the team in understanding the scope of the project. He or she should describe the project scope statement by defining the:

- Project boundaries
- Requirements
- Constraints
- Assumptions

Constraints are specific factors that can limit both the buyers and sellers options. One of the most common constraints for projects is availability of resources. Other constraints can involve required delivery dates, available skilled resources and organizational policies.

Assumptions are factors that are considered to be true, but their truth cannot be validated at this point in time.

The project scope statement provides the list of deliverables and acceptance criteria for the project and its products, services and results. Important information about any technical issues or concerns related to the products, services, and results of the project are provided by the product scope description component of the project scope statement. The structured and detailed plan for the projects scope is provided by the work breakdown structure (WBS) and WBS dictionary components of the project scope statement. Project Manager should keep everyone focused on the ultimate goal and manage the scope of the goal.

Risks

Projects can be delivered with a great degree of confidence by reducing risks and costs. A Project Manager should be actively involved during risk management. He should guide the team to identify the risks of the project, quantify them based on their degree of uncertainty and control them. He should conduct brainstorming sessions in the beginning of the project to identify all the risks and name them. The cause and impact of the risks need to be identified and finally, strategies to minimize or eliminate risks are defined and implemented.

The risk response plan should be prepared to include the strategy and action items to address the strategy. The action items should include:

- What needs to be done

- Who is doing it

- When it should be completed

The risks need to be continually monitored to identify any change in the status. Making assumptions in projects is a big risk. Assumptions are potential failure points in a project. Project Manager should monitor and manage assumptions. They need to be either proved or disproved.

Quality

A project is successful if it meets Quality standards, and satisfies the Customer. Quality for every project needs to be planned. It is the responsibility of the Project Manager to plan quality and ensure it is met. Producing Quality Plans involves identifying all the deliverables at the start of the project and deciding how best to validate their quality. It is a plan as to how and when Quality Events and Quality Materials are applied to a project.

Quality Materials could be:

- Standards

- Templates

- Checklists

- Guidelines

- Procedures

- Process

Quality Events could be:

- Expert Review

- Peer Review

- Walkthrough

- Formal Inspection

- Standard Audit

- Process Review

A Project Manager should conduct subjective or objective assessments and periodically, monitor and report quality status during project reviews. A project Manager should decide when should the Quality Events be held, who should be involved in producing the deliverables, what Quality Materials be used, what is the most appropriate way to check quality of the deliverables, what needs to go thru a quality check. All these can be identified and documented in the Quality Plan.

Procurement

A Project Manager should also be good in planning for procurement. The purpose of the procurement planning is to identify which project needs can best be met by purchasing and acquiring products, services, or results outside the project organization.

This process involves consideration of:

- Whether to purchase or not

- How

- What

- How much

- When

to acquire.

When the project obtains products, services, and results required for project performance from outside the performing organization, the processes from plan purchases and acquisitions, through contract closure are performed for each item to be purchased or acquired. Project Manager should have a knowledge of developing the procurement management plan by using existing formal and informal procurement-related policies, procedures, guidelines, and management systems. He or she should also be able to select the contract types to be used.

Communication

Communication is the glue that holds a project team together. Without clear, timely, unambiguous communication, even a small team co-located together will have major problems. In the case of a virtual team, poor communication will render an already challenging situation nearly impossible to control.

Effective communication includes a well-designed infrastructure and the processes, messages, and documents that use that infrastructure to exchange information among project stakeholders to keep them aligned on the project goals and informed of the project's progress.

An effective Project Manager spends most of his time in Communication. According to PMBOK guide, a Project Manager spends 70-90% of his time in communication during a project.

Communication Management needs to be planned at the beginning of the project. The type/format of the reports to be sent to the team, management and the stakeholders about the project status and progress needs to be identified in communications planning. The project status needs to be tracked and monitored effectively using various tracking tools.

Only bad Project Managers hold *"go around the room"* type status meetings. This type of status update is considered to be a waste of time. He or she should ensure timely and appropriate generation and collection of information. They should follow email ethics during formal written communication. Being precise and clear when communicating helps in better understanding the message.

The law of success says 35% Hard skills + 65% soft skills = 100% success (Statistics courtesy – Harvard Business School).

Human Resources

The Project Manager plays a vital role in managing Human Resources for a project. Managing people in an operational area is usually much easier than a project area. During the planning stage the Project Manager should:

- Identify the required resources for the project

- Fight for the necessary resources if required

- Prepare a staffing management plan as to who and when the resources will be on the project

- Identify task dependencies

- Assign responsibilities to each resource.

Methodically articulating the roles and responsibilities of each team member is important for ensuring a high performing team. It should help each member understand the scope of their role which sometimes clarifies task and review responsibilities in unexpected ways, and help ensure that all needed cross-functional team members are involved early enough in the project. He or she should ensure optimum utilization of the available resource pool.

The really good Project Managers are the ones who can manage people through the stress of a high demand project. By managing people in a stressful environment, a project manager adds value to a project.

Creating Recognition and Reward Systems is very important for every project. They help to keep the team motivated. Motivating a person is more of an art. It's a blend of understanding a person's needs, a technique to adopt, and a pinch of creativity.

Goals can be planned at the beginning of the project for each team member. It keeps them focused throughout the project. Performance of the team members should be recorded to track and monitor them. Giving people feedback is equally important in making them feel connected and have a pride in their work. It also helps them to understand their ability to perform and expectations from management. He or she should also obtain feedback from his subordinates to improve his or her own abilities. He should listen to the team needs and problems. Having good listening skills is an

additional skill. At times the Project Manager has to listen by being empathetic. This helps him/her understand the problem or situation from both perspectives.

Team Building

Team building is a vital activity to be undertaken by a Project Manager during a project. Team building should start early in the life of the project. It is the forming of project team into a cohesive group working for the best interest of the Project and the organization in order to enhance performance. It is the job of the Project Manager to guide, manage and improve the interaction of team members.

The Project Manager typically addresses the conflicts, as and when they appear. A good PM always smells conflicts in advance and does not allow it to grow, although no one can get completely rid of conflicts. "People problems" in projects are not just caused by "bad apples". Tensions and conflicts are often a symptom of underlying problems with the project itself (and some conflict can be positive!).

The Project Manager should get at those root causes, identify them, and effect "in-flight repairs" on the project. The Project Manager should improve the trust and confidence among the team. He should incorporate team building activities into all project activities. The team building requires a concerted effort and continues attendance. Work Breakdown Structure is one of the team building tools.

Motivation

Motivating team members is one of the biggest tasks for any Project Manager during a project. Good performers should be motivated through increase in salaries, promotion, recognition, providing more challenges and backing the right cause.

Motivating is also best done by rewarding them and letting them grow. Reward System could include:

- Awarding prizes for good performance

- Recommending team members for pay hikes

- Promotions or choice of their work assignment

- Sending notes to their management about their great performance

- Planning milestone parties or celebrations

- Adjusting the project to assign people to requested activities or to remove them from disliked activities.

The Project Manager should build relationship with the team members and his peers. He should conduct frequent group meetings and on-to-one session with the subordinates to give them a comfort zone. He/she should organize for regular training to enhance their skills. He/she should get involved in their work by understanding the work culture and environment. The best way to gain co-operation is to give rewards. Providing increased responsibility, professional growth and recognition are motivating agents, and inspire employees to improve their performance. This is proved thru Herzberg's theory of Motivation.

Problem Solving

A Project Manager should have good problem solving and decision making skills. Problem solving ability can be developed by defining the cause of the problem, not just the symptoms of the problem.

He/she should firstly:

- Analyse the problem clearly

- Identify possible solutions to it

- Implement a decision

- Review the decision.

- Lastly confirm that the decision solves the problem.

Decision making ability can be developed by identifying the purpose of the decision, gather information, brainstorm and listing possible choices.

- Evaluate each choice in terms of its consequences

- Determine the best alternative

- Put the decision into action

- Finally evaluate the outcome of the decision and action steps.

Leadership

The key quality of any Project Manager should be leadership. That is the ability to be the visionary for the people who are working under them. He/she is a person who can set the course and direction for his subordinates. Leaders are the creators of new organization. Quality leaders are like magnets that attract the best pool of people to build an effective team for an organization and provide inspiring support even during times of failure as they are not afraid of risks. A true leader gives the credit for the success to all those who work with him/her while he/she absorbs the failures. This leads to great accomplishments with his/her team. The highest calling of a true leader is inspiring others to reach the highest of their abilities.

Summary of Activities

To summarize on the list of activities a Project Manager does during a project is:

- Get clarification of the requirements

- Help the team in estimating activities

- Revise the list of activities

- Make them understand the objectives of the project clearly

- Monitor time frames given to them

- Milestone accomplishment

- Check the quality of the deliverables by doing random code revise, standards being followed

- Produce status, progress reports

- Inform the key stakeholders on time

- Effectively manage interdepartmental activities

- Monitor the team and their performance, reward them, reprimand them if necessary, guide them and warn them in case of poor performance

- Resolve conflicts of team members, listen to their problems and help them in resolving

- Help them to work as a cohesive team, motivate them, understand their interest and help them to plan goals accordingly.

Conclusion

I have discussed at length the importance and criticality of the expertise required for a good Project Manager. As a Project manager, it's not just sufficient to do planning and execution of a project. There is lot more to it. A successful project manager is someone who gets things done with a bias to action. This person must earn and maintain respect and credibility throughout the organization and with the customers. He or she must be the product champion, and have the courage to direct and to obtain support for the project. They should have "soft" skills associated with successful leadership. The main emphasis is on people management, general management and interpersonal skills.

I have delved into details of the task planning, scheduling, scope management, risk management, quality management, procurement planning, communication management, human resource management, team building, motivating, problem solving, decision making and good leadership skills.

To summarize on the areas of expertise of a project manager are:

- Holistic thinking

- Penetrative thinking

- Risk taking

- Better communication skills

- Organizational skills

- Social skills

- Better at error detection

- Creating good work environment

- Consistent performance

- Stable achievements.

These have been drawn from my personal experiences in the different aspects of project management and hopefully even a first time reader will get an idea of project management and its importance in today's world.

The Author

Jyothi Goudar, is a PMP certified Project Manager. She has worked as a Project Manager managing modular size technical teams. She has hands on experience on Java/J2EE technology. Jyothi has over 8 years experience in the Software industry and has led successful projects on the Supply Chain, Banking & Financial domain.

Jyothi has a passion for project management and people orientation. Her experience includes working in several countries such as India, USA and Belgium and she has managed globally distributed virtual teams. She won the Team Success Award at the Manhattan Associates company for demonstrating exceptional teamwork.

Project Perfect

Project Perfect is a project management software consulting and training organisation based in Sydney Australia. Their focus is to provide creative yet pragmatic solutions to Project Management issues.

Project Perfect sell "Project Administrator" software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called "Method H"™, and sell software to support the technique. For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au