Simple Project Management Explanation

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Overview

I was asked recently by a personal friend to help them with some Project Management. They had been thrust into a project management role in a medical organisation but had no idea what it actually meant, and what they should be doing. Their prior experience had been in nursing so it was quite a leap to become a project manager.

I spent a few hours with the person and tried to do a sketch of what was involved, and it occurred to me that many people get into this situation. No experience of project management and suddenly they are in a PM role. Putting aside the rights and wrongs of such a move, the person still needs to survive.

That prompted me to put together a brief explanation covering the scope of project management. It is a bit simplistic, but will provide a new Project Manager with a map of what they need to at least be aware of. It might also be useful for a Project Manager to take to a key stakeholder to explain what this "project management thing" is all about.

Framework

It is useful to put a context around a role. Fortunately there is a good context provided by the Project Management Institute (PMI). That framework breaks project management down into nine areas. I would also propose there is another dimension to each of the nine areas. The dimension is time. Each of the nine areas has work that must be completed during the initiation of a project, and work that is completed as the project moves forward. They are two different types of activity. The following are the nine areas and I have split each into:

- Initiating activities
- Ongoing activities

1. Scope Management

Initiating Activities

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, we don't know where we are going. Scope needs to be defined in terms of :

- Outcome – What we are trying to achieve
- Deliverables – What we will deliver to achieve the outcome

Without a definition of scope, we cannot establish the cost, the time, or the resources required.

Ongoing Activities

There will always be changes along the way. The role of the Project Manager is to track those changes, seek approval where required, and adjust the time and cost to reflect the changes.

2. Time Management

Initiating Activities

The time taken is a result of looking at the deliverables, the time it will take to produce those deliverables, and the resources available. A schedule needs to be established at the start of the project. The impact of not producing a schedule is that the project will stumble from one stage to the next without any clear indication of where it is up to, or what resources are required in the coming days or weeks.

Ongoing Activities

Just as a Line Manager is constantly organising and reorganising the workload of their staff, so to does the Project Manager. Some tasks will take longer than expected and some less time. Resources need to be constantly redirected, and the overall time for the project monitored and adjusted.

3. Cost Management

Initiating Activities

Once a plan is in place, the cost needs to be estimated. Cost will consist of both resource costs, and capital costs. A budget needs to be allocated to the project so that money is not wasted on something that the organisation cannot, or choses not to fund.

Ongoing Activities

Just as for a Line Manager, the Project Manager needs to monitor expenditure. The task is usually more complicated as costs tend to fluctuate as people come onto, or leave the project. A project that is running well under budget at the half way mark, can suddenly become over budget in a few weeks. Expenditure is often lumpy and the Project Manager needs to be on top of past and future expenditure.

4. Resource Management

Initiating Activities

If a Line Manager is starting up a new function, he or she would look at the skills required, recruit resources and induct them into the organisation. It is no different for a Project Manager. Resources have to be found and brought into the project. Their role has to be defined just as a Line Manager might draw up a position description. They have to be trained and inducted into the project.

Ongoing Activities

Management of resources requires constant attention. People need to be directed, recruited and their performance monitored. Teams have to be built and motivated under often difficult circumstances. There are always pressures of deadlines and changes of focus.

5. Communication Management

Initiating Activities

A project typically involves two potential dangers to a corporation. "Expenditure" and "Change". There is usually a risk that the expenditure can be wasted and that the change will bring disruption to the organisation. A plan needs to be drawn up to understand who, needs to be told what, when and how often.

Ongoing Activities

The Project Manager is responsible for ensuring the information is collated and disseminated to support the communication plan. In addition, there will be considerable informal communication to ensure information is not only disseminated but heard and understood. Feedback is also important and this can only occur if the Project Manager makes the effort to talk with people and seek their input.

6. Risks Management

Initiating Activities

A project is about doing something new. Every new endeavour has risk. At the start of the project, a Project Manager should identify the risks and what can be done to lessen the risks. By taking action at the start, many of the risks can be lessened or removed. It is like a Line Manager having a disaster recovery plan. If it does go wrong, we know what to do.

Ongoing Activities

Risks will need to be monitored during the project, and managed appropriately. All through the project new risks will evolve and these need to be mitigated. The Project Manager will be the person with the broadest view and will likely see risks, or hear about risks all through the lifecycle of the project.

7. Procurement Management

Initiating Activities

If external services or materials need to be purchased, the process needs to be established before the project starts. In many cases the organisation may well have a procurement process and this can be applied to the project.

Ongoing Activities

As purchases are made, the Project Manager will need to ensure they meet the standards of the organisation. They will also need to ensure suppliers understand and follow the guidelines for procurement. Orders need to be placed, invoices checked and payments processed.

8. Quality Management

Initiating Activities

There is always the temptation to cut quality to meet deadlines. Before the project starts, the Project Manager needs to identify what quality checks will apply to the deliverables. A quality plan should be drawn up so that time can be built into the schedule to accommodate the quality activities.

Ongoing Activities

Implementation of the quality plan will entail arranging the quality activities (testing, reviews, inspections, etc.) and ensuring they are carried out on time. It will also cover managing any rectification and validation of the fixes.

9. Integration Management

Initiating Activities

Although there are more sophisticated explanations of Integration Management, I prefer to think of it as "pulling it all together". With eight other areas planned and organised, the Project Manager needs to pull all the threads together into a cohesive plan. Integration is to organise the scope, people, tasks, risks, communication, quality, procurement and resources so that the outcomes of the project are achieved.

Ongoing Activities

During the project, things will constantly need to be pulled together. Plans will need to be tweaked and unforseen circumstances addressed. People will over achieve or under achieve their targets. Tasks will take longer or shorter than expected. Risks will come to fruition and need to be resolved. The PM will be constantly juggling things to achieve his or her ends.

Summary

It sounds simple doesn't it? Just focus on nine areas and you will have a successful project. From the number of project failures, it is evident it is not so simple. What is explained above is the equivalent of providing a summary of brain surgery in four or five pages. You might understand it a whole lot more, but you wouldn't want to try it out. Project Management like any other career requires years of experience and theory to practice well. This document is like the piece of paper a doctor may provide when you are diagnosed with a particular condition. It provides an overview so you have a context to discuss the topic, and hopefully raises a few questions where you need to drill down further with the assistance of a subject matter expert.

If you are not the Manager but the person responsible for the project, this framework will prove helpful in your management of the project. It can focus you on what you need to be asking the Project Manager. For example, does the PM have a quality plan, and are the activities being undertaken. What communication has been planned and is it still relevant now the project is in progress? Are there new communication needs and has the communication plan been adjusted?

One final point. It is important to differentiate the project management activities from the project activities. The project may be to build a road. Pouring the concrete or surveying the landscape is part of the project activities. The management of those activities is another role. It may be performed by a person who also does project activities but each has a separate set of activities to perform. It is estimated that project management takes around 15% of the time in a project. In the initial stage, the percentage may be close to 100%. Make sure you can differentiate who is doing the management and who is doing the doing.

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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.

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