How to Avoid 12 Common Mistakes in Project Management

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Every project manager potentially faces countless mistakes that affect projects, cause delays and, in some cases, contribute to complete project failure.

In this article, I take a back-to-basics look at why so many organisations run projects poorly. I also offer solutions to tighten up the PM process.

Here are 12 common mistakes in project management—and how you can avoid them.

1. Employing a Project Manager Lacking Experience

Managing a project is difficult and becomes even more difficult if the project manager lacks experience. Knowledge of running status meetings, developing a project plan, managing risks and issues, and dealing with stakeholders is crucial to the successful outcome of the project.

Having even a few projects under the belt helps project managers adjust and refine their approach and become fully effective.

You may feel this jars with my recent appeal to organisations to "give junior project managers a chance". Important as an experienced PM is to project success, there is nothing stopping that PM from being shadowed by a junior counterpart.

This way, the new PM learns the ropes while on the job, a valuable personal development step after classroom training. In turn, the experienced PM has the satisfaction of passing on his hard-earned knowledge.

2. Poor Resource Matching

Are you selecting people for your project based on availability or skill set? All too often, people are selected simply because they are available. This could put the project at risk if the skills and experience needed are not present in the team.

It's important to employ the right project manager and team members to deliver on the customer's requirements and expectations.

Build a team based on skill set and experience, not on availability. Consider

whether it's worth paying a premium for a small team of highly proficient and experienced people.

3. Poor Project Initiation

Is it worth having a project kick-off meeting? Many projects drift into action without a clear start point. Everyone knows what he or she is doing; it's obvious, right?

Not always.

There's a tendency to forget who has been involved in what conversations before the project starts. I overheard this gem from a project team member speaking at the end of a particularly fraught project: "I was never quite sure what I was supposed to be doing".

It's important that everyone on the project team is clear about the project goal, aims and objectives.

All team members need to be clear about their individual roles, responsibilities, key project milestones and deadline dates. They need the opportunity to ask questions if they are unsure about any aspect of their roles on the project or what the project is in the business to deliver.

A project kick-off meeting is hugely valuable in getting the project started on the right foot. It could be the most important time you'll spend on the project.

4. Poor Requirements Gathering

Many projects start with the barest headline list of requirements, only to find later the customers' needs have not been clearly understood. Often, there are gaps in the requirements, dead-ends or requests that simply don't make sense without additional clarification.

One way to avoid this problem is by writing a statement of requirements.

This document is a guide to the requirements of the project. Once you create your statement of requirements, ensure the customer and other stakeholders sign-up to it and understand that this is what you have agreed to deliver.

5. Lack of Clear Objective and Success Measures

The cause of many project failures is not poor planning or lack of appropriate skills. It is quite simply the absence of a clear objective and measures with which to identify success or failure.

Ask yourself what the project is in the business of delivering? This is a difficult question to answer because it needs more thought than you might expect.

When thinking about your project objective, use the acronym DUMB -- doable, understandable, manageable and beneficial -- to help you. Think long and hard about why you are doing what you are doing.

Ask your customer to help you define success measures for the project.

6. Underestimating Time and Budget Needed

How much time and budget do I need for my project? The answer isn't a matter of simple allocation based on assumptions or guesswork.

How much is enough?

Recently, I was in a meeting where the customer plucked figures from the air, looking for confirmation that the project could be completed for what he considered, 'reasonable'. Estimating needs to be much more scientific than that.

Start a project on the right foot by having enough resources right from the get go. Get expert advice from people who have worked on similar projects. Take a bottom-up budgeting approach to arrive at reasonable estimates for the project.

Always avoid numbers plucked out of thin air.

7. Poor Communication with Stakeholders and Project Team

It can be immensely annoying when people on a project fail to communicate properly and then lay the blame at your door for errors caused by their lack of communication. If you don't keep everyone on the project informed of decisions, exceptions, changes, team structures and so on, you can't be surprised when they inadvertently make mistakes.

There is no excuse for failing to communicate with your stakeholders and project team.

Communication is the lifeblood of a project, so keep all communication channels open. Keep everyone updated with the latest project status, risks, issues and developments.

If there is a change of direction, communicate it clearly.

8. Failing to Manage Project Scope

A common cause of project failure and conflict is scope change. In a recent conversation with a project manager running a major Chicago-based project, the subject of scope came up.

I asked whether he was having problems with scope changes. He replied that the

scope was not agreed upon six months into the project, so his answer should have been a clear yes. Nobody knew what the project scope contained.

At the beginning of any project, the project manager needs to insist that the project scope is agreed upon and baselined.

The project manager must introduce a process to handle requests for scope changes. The process should follow a set criteria to assess the change for impact on the budget and schedule. The impact of the change on the project must be presented to the Project Board for approval. In some cases, where the change has little impact, the project manager may be empowered to approve it.

9. Doing Everything Yourself (Ignoring the Input of Your Team)

It is never a good idea for project managers to go on a power trip and discourage ideas and suggestions from their teams. Team members are the people most in touch with the challenges, risk and issues likely to impact the project.

Ignoring their suggestions and advice may contribute to difficulties on the project or, in the worst cases, contribute to a failure. Team planning sessions are a great way to engage your team and give them a stake in a project's success.

I'm working with a project manager that shoots down people's ideas and suggestions because she thinks she knows the best way to approach every aspect of the project. People in her team have learned to keep quiet.

As a result, the team doesn't have a stake in the success of the project. They do what they are told, nothing more. It won't necessarily cause the project to fail, but the project manager has put herself at unnecessary risk.

10. Micromanaging the Project Team

Another common cause of conflict on projects is project managers who micro-manage their teams. All team members believe they are in the team for the skills and expertise they bring to the project. They want to feel responsible, valued and empowered.

Micro managing these people destroys trust and can lead to a lack of confidence and motivation.

However hard it feels, letting go of the reins is essential to the well-being of your project team. It can be hard to let go and trust people. However, that trust is almost always repaid. I discussed this very point with my manager recently.

We both agreed, working as a team produces better results. It's also more fun.

11. Expecting Software to Solve Your Problems

Specialist project management software can help with everything from project planning to task and time management, team collaboration and reporting. Today's tools are slick, fast and cost efficient. Much common office software, such as spreadsheets, can be used to help control budgets, assess risk and manage scope.

Project management software is a tool and on its own will not solve problems on your project. Problems are solved by people, not software. Don't buy software believing that it will transform your project and, as I recently read in some marketing blurb, that it "makes managing projects easy". The software is there to help you solve problems, not to solve them for you.

12. Not Following a Process

What's your project approach going to be? Many projects start with a fanfare and a great deal of optimism only to get bogged down and struggle for months and years without delivery. It's not that people aren't working hard. They are, but don't have a clear process to follow.

They don't know how far it is to the finish line.

It's important to know what needs to be done, the order in which it will be done and the key milestones along the way. The best processes are those that are kept simple. They are easy to understand and have clear steps and outcomes.

Everyone knows how far it is to the finish line.

Summary

These are 12 common mistakes that affect projects. They're all mistakes that are easily avoided by vigilance, good planning and clear communication.

Don't assume they won't impact your project. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least one or two of these mistakes affect most projects.

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