Twelve Gifts You Can Give Your Favorite Project

Several years ago, I was working on "The Project from Hell." In fact I was managing a piece of it, and I was reminded of some of the things executive sponsors can do to make projects successful. In this case very few of these were present, and we all suffered as a result. These are the "gifts" that project aunts, uncles and grandparents can give to projects, or which they should insist the project parents address before the children wither away unnourished.

No matter what the economic environment - upturn, downturn or opportunistic, most of us will eventually, if not immediately, be launching initiatives to fix, build or transform something in our business.

Projects challenge the status quo. They are inherently "change" initiatives, resisted by many. You wouldn't send your daughter to college in a foreign country without adequate clothing and cash reserves, nor without a way to communicate with you and a round trip ticket. Neither should project adults launch these difficult change initiatives without packing the backpack of the project with some important gifts to ensure survival and success.

As designated adults, project sponsors have an ethical obligation to provide as many of these elements of support as possible. When staff members' efforts are wasted, their families impacted by their stress and long working hours, and corporate resources are not producing the intended results of the dear investments, management is guilty of poor stewardship.

1. Communicate the intended results - both overall and immediate

I was amazed two days before a deliverable was due to find that two of the individuals responsible for it did not know this specific deadline. Admittedly, the project schedule had changed a few times, but the project manager had emphasized repeatedly to her lieutenants that they must ensure everyone on the team knew the schedule, the expectations, and their part in it. This is the simplest of rules, but it requires constant vigilance. Particularly in busy and complex projects, folks who are heads down can fail to hear or believe the expectations contained in the master plan. Regular, simple communications mechanisms for these details should be in place to ensure the entire team is clued in to the latest game plan and what their immediate and long term tasks are.

2. Resource the project adequately - budget and schedule

As companies have sought cost reductions in recent years, I have seen a lot of projects under-resourced, particularly with regard to budget. Be realistic. Add some fat to projections to cover contingencies. Do not always assume the optimistic scenario will prevail - it usually doesn't. Seek and demand adequate budget, staffing and schedule to get the job done. It becomes a deadly spiral downward if a project is not properly resourced.

3. Don't expect the staff to remedy poor project planning or bidding

I've watched project staff labor out of town, working 'til 11 every night, or later, having to work weekends, for extended periods as long as 6-9 months. Every 3 weeks, with some important milestone at hand, they are exhorted to "do what it takes" to meet the next milestone. After the second or third occurrence of this, management should renegotiate the project budget and schedule. It is not acceptable business practice, nor is it ethical, to expect the individuals on a project to "make up" for the idealistic project plans of their leaders. Leaders need to step up to the fundamental problem so the project staff can work a reasonable schedule and maintain adequate quality by getting some sleep and having a life.

4. Hold staff fully accountable for their individual roles

If the infrastructure people are late, the testing can't proceed. If the program developers are sloppy, the schedule will be impacted by quality re-work. If the training staff refuse to draft rough material based on system requirements, specs. and high level designs, insisting on waiting for all the final developed screens, then the schedule will be threatened. Each sub-team or role must take responsibility for doing their part and be held accountable for those initiatives. No one can be allowed to

pass the buck and shirk the steps they must take as soon as practical to advance the project. Leadership must expect, demand and reward or discipline those who don't carry their weight.

5. Insist on adequate skills

Individuals who can't do the job or can't pull their weight are a drag on the rest of the team. If they are being mentored and are learning on the job, that is great, as long as others can carry the effort. If they are just not capable or improperly skilled, management must step up and address the issue, no matter how awkward. The best way to deal with this issue is to avoid it altogether by staffing the project with the right people with the right capabilities.

6. Focus on change management, not just the technical solution

We have a civilization of technically-oriented business people. Most people act as if the key element to "get right" is the design or the solution. A less than perfect solution, properly implemented will trump a perfect solution which is left by the side of the road because of people's resistance. The problem is not the technology, the process design, or the organization design. The problem is the people's acceptance of the change. The truth is that no matter how good the design is, attitude and commitment will always be the most important elements in large scale business change. The hard stuff is the soft stuff. It is a political problem, and, frequently, nobody is managing it. Give the gift of real attention, a real investment in managing the soft side of the project.

7. Ban the we-they syndrome

A team or extended team must have a collective will and responsibility. It is up to the leaders of the project to create this cultural environment. While organizational units naturally will operate from some sense of their individual domains, the most successful projects have made real unified collaboration one of the core values of the extended team. The alternative is deadly.

8. Avoid micro-managing

What is micro-management? It is substituting your involvement in discrete decision-making in areas where a subordinate or a team should be empowered. Outline the objectives, the parameters of successful performance and the requirements. Agree on the budget, deadline and required resources. Then get out of the way. Check on progress, but don't intervene constantly. The team gets de-motivated and, because they are closer to the action, will make adequate if not better decisions about detailed items.

9. Force the users to be involved

I once worked for a technology company which thought they could serve clients by developing a systems solution on their own and delivering it on the assigned date to users who were too busy to get involved in the project. On the appointed month, a marvelous machine was delivered as if it were a piece of hardware. The organization was not committed to it, numerous enhancements were required, and the full implementation of the system took several years.

10. Force the sponsors to be involved

Look in the mirror. This means disciplining yourself or your peers or superiors to play their requisite role in directing, monitoring and caring for the project. Demonstrate leadership in commitment to the project. Give quality time regularly. People will notice.

11. Provide constant clarity around objectives and scope

Professionals are self-governing machines. Ironically, however, people will make assumptions if there is a void or if key parameters are not regularly reinforced. There are no more important parameters than objectives and scope. Start with clear objectives for the project and make initial scope decisions as clearly and finally as possible. If objectives change during mid-course, this must, of course be communicated clearly and loudly. In the mean time, if nothing changes, regularly re-visit and reinforce the objectives and scope. Given this, the team will self-manage to the expressed end-point and boundary lines. Sample and provide feedback regularly to confirm whether people are internalizing the goals and limits. If there are problems, re-communicate in a two way session.

12. Reinforce reality

Refusing to acknowledge the realities of schedule and resource requirements, quality issues, or technical obstacles is the hubris of leadership. Often the project manager is the abused messenger when management and the sponsor fail to address the underlying issues and their required remedies. It is always good to get real.