

project management is people management

~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque

For some reason, the Gantt chart has become synonymous with the idea of project management. As if they are the same. As if projects are managed by Gantt charts. Wrong. Very wrong. Project management is a process. Trying to manage a project by Gantt charting nearly always becomes an exercise in moving coloured bars around.

In business, project management is not about Gantt charts. Or critical paths. Or hiring someone with a PMP designation (Project Management Professional). It is about understanding concepts and skills. But really, it is about people. To be a great project manager, you need to be first-and-foremost a great manager. This is the crucial first concept every project manager must internalize, and every firm should work into a leadership and talent development strategy.

As David Maister, author of the seminal book *The Trusted Advisor* so succinctly puts it: "The trouble with the work world is, it is full of people." I can't think of any projects of value where you as a project manager will not need to manage, or at least interface with, one or many other people in order to successfully get your project done. They may be employees or team members or even bosses, or they may be outside the organization – suppliers, consultants, customers – who knows. The point is you are now at least somewhat (likely very) reliant on others to succeed. Here are some very simple 'rules' for good people management – I challenge you to tell me they are not 100% applicable to project management:

- Give people the tools/resources they need, teach them what you can, then get out of the way.
- Start every statement with "we".
- Give credit where credit is due: if things go well, share the glory with the team.
- Shoulder the responsibility: if things go off the rails, take the blame. It is your fault.
- Praise in public, punish in private.
- It is impossible to over-communicate. It is impossible to be too redundant. It is impossible to over-communicate.
- Respect and take care of your team members – you will need them.

There is a great episode of *The Apprentice* from the first season in which one of the contestants tries to manage a polo event with a spreadsheet. He rides to the event alone in a limo separated from his team, and spends more time behind his laptop than he does with vendors. That is how not to manage a project.

KEY CONCEPTS

Three other key concepts every project manager must understand:

1. Operational specificity

If you are a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants type, you are in for a rough ride. Flexibility and adaptability are somewhat rare (and valuable) in project management, but planning and detail orientation are the must-haves. Operational specificity is the set up pitch for managing the details – it is about defining tasks not only in terms of what needs to get done, but also in terms of how/where/when things need to get done.



2. Transcending details to see the big picture and create value.

There is a temptation when running projects to hold your breath and not come up for air until the project is complete. The problem this presents is: it is not always easy to see that while you want to be going North, you have started to veer North East. Great project managers pull themselves out of the details at regular intervals and ask themselves “what is it we are really trying to accomplish? How can we create value based on where we are today?”

3. Aiming to exceed expectations

I’ve used this line before, but it’s a good one. My kindergarten teacher had a poster on the wall of our classroom with a picture of a dart sticking into a wall. The caption was “If you aim at nothing, you’ll probably hit it.” Project management is tough enough as it is – you have to deal with other people and their respective motivations and schedules, you have to deal with time and money and lots of moving pieces – don’t make it worse by just aiming to meet expectations. Things are going to go wrong. The only way to ensure you succeed is by planning to over deliver right from the start.

SKILLS

Okay, now for the skills. There are many skills which will help you as a project manager. But there are only four that really matter:

1. Project planning

I have seen many projects either fail outright, or delivered late and/or over budget. Many of them fail in the planning stage. The basics are very simple, but so often ignored. Every project plan should consist of the same elements: a clearly defined and measurable objective, milestones and a deadline, a budget, and a clearly laid out action plan including specific tasks where each task is assigned a due date and one champion (operational specificity). To put a fine point on it, the project failures I’ve encountered were doomed by either an unclear objective or by having multiple people assigned to getting a task done.

2. Communications planning

This is not only almost never done well, it is almost never done. Yet it can make or break a project. What good is it to have a solid work plan if whoever you are running the project for (senior management, client, etc.) doesn’t know what is going on. They will fret about it. They will check in. They will start to micro-manage. They may run interference and start asking your team members for updates, or meddle in their tasks. The best means of avoiding all of this is to a) figure out how and when your project sponsor would like to be updated – email?, phone?, daily?, weekly?, and then to b) proactively send out structured updates – the shorter the better.

And we haven’t even talked about communicating with your team and/or stakeholders you’re counting on yet. Clear, open, honest and regular communication with each person you are counting on is important, and should be planned for at the start (people management). Which leads to...

3. Day-to-day active team management

This is where the rubber hits the road. Whether you are motivating, coaching, brainstorming with, solving problems for, updating, questioning, pushing back on, or seeking updates from your team members – or just staying on top of your own tasks – this is where you will bring the most value as a project manager. And nearly all of these activities are related to people management, not technical execution.

4. Documentation, tracking and reporting



Ah, finally we are back to where we started: Gantt charts. Use whatever tracking tool you like, the goal is to manage the project, not the tool. Depending on your project sponsor, documentation and reporting will be more or less important. But regardless of the amount of paperwork desired, it should always take a back seat to working with your team to get stuff done.

There aren't many rules here. One is: simple is better. If you build, for example, a simple spreadsheet to keep track of money spent and time elapsed, it is less likely that you will constantly have to change your tool as your project inevitably morphs around you.

At Torque, we say "Project management is not difficult, it is hard." If you remember that project management is really people management, you're off on the right foot.

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