Project Management

A View from Impact Factory

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Project Management

What's your project?

> A fund-raiser to fix the church roof?

> A five-year programme to completely re-organise the way services are delivered in your Borough?

> A special event to celebrate the launch of a new product?

> A marketing campaign to increase sales?

> Installing a new kitchen?

> Running an IT project with contributors in six different countries? With, perhaps, six different employers?

> Planning your summer hols?

The list is endless: we are all of us surrounded by projects, and they all have some things in common. They have a beginning, middle and end (and here you thought we were just a bunch of pretty faces!).

Yes, we know it's common sense, but it is amazing that this is one thing that can get missed right from the get-go: all projects have a beginning point and an end point and they set the parameters for what's possible to accomplish and when. More on this anon.

Some projects are more complex than others. Some projects rely heavily on the input of a vast range of people, while some only rely on one person to get them done. Summer hols planned by Committee *can* be a disaster!

For the sake of this document, we will concentrate on work-related projects, but do know that anything we suggest in this context can (and 'should') be used in just about any project you've got on the boil (or about to be boiled).

Getting started

Having an idea of what you want to achieve is a good place to start. Most of us recognise that a project should have a good business outcome but what about the people involved? Including you.

Most people involved in a project will get something personal out of it – even if only a headache. Putting your focus on that personal outcome, deciding what it is and why you want it gives you a better chance of getting it and of finding the motivation to keep going when things aren't going to plan.

You might want to start by asking yourself:

> What do I want from this?
> Is it possible?
> When and where do I want it and with whom?
> What might I have to give up or lose to get it? And is that OK?
> Who or what do I need to have to make it possible?

What you want might be fantastic and it's great to shoot for the stars but a reality check is good for your sanity. So, work out the workable options for your great outcomes.

Knowing where to stop is often a problem, whether it's a project pushing back the boundaries of science or decorating the spare room – so how will you know when your project has reached its intended end? What will it be like? The clearer you are at this point the easier it will be to recognise when you get there – a bit like planning a journey, you usually want an idea of the destination before you set out.

What do you need?

OK so now you know where you are going and how you'll know when you've got there so all you need now is to kit up for the journey. Take a look at what you need for your ideal outcome – people, kit, space, money, time, etc.

Add to that list the inner resources that you or others will need – commitment, enthusiasm, motivation. The best-planned projects can fail because the hearts and minds of the people involved have not been won over. On the other hand there are lots of projects that would never have got off the ground but for one or two champions who didn't understand the concept of failure. Their self-belief, enthusiasm or sheer bloody-mindedness carried them through. What inner resources would give your project a momentum all of its own?

Oh, for a project where all the people, time and commitment we need are all available! Life is rarely that simple. Take a look at what you realistically have got or can beg, borrow or steal (figuratively speaking of course!) to make your project a success. Who will you have to negotiate with to get the best resources? What can you trade? Who do you know and who can you influence? Bribe? Blackmail?

Most of us have a friend with a cousin whose partner's uncle works for a guy with just the thing that you need for your project.

So, where there is a gap between what you need and what you've got, you might want to take a look at who you know and who they know. Take a look at the person that has what you want and work back from there. Who is in their inner circle? And how can you get at them from your circle of influence? It might take a few connections along the way but worth the effort if it gets you what you want.

At the end of the day you will have a set of resources that are available to you in your project. It may be that the budget is less than planned or the ideal member of staff isn't available. How does that affect your planned outcome?

Planning

Planning is a joy to some and a nightmare to others. If planning is second only to having teeth extracted without anaesthetic on your list of pet hates then try to enlist someone who loves it. They'll have it mapped out for you in full Technicolor with delivery dates, critical paths (see below), resource allocations and budget projections before you can say 'Millennium Dome'.

Otherwise knuckle down and look at what you want to achieve, draw up a list of actions and get going with who will do what by when, how long it will take and how much it will cost.

There are some things that can happen pretty much any time during a project as long as they happen. Others are vital.

When we were having our loft converted the painter couldn't start until the plastering was done, the plasterer couldn't start work until the electrician had finished wiring up, but he needed the plumber to have finished plumbing in the shower before he could connect it up. The plumber was waiting for a very small but vital part that was missing from the shower. The part was on a six-week order so work ground to a halt till the very small part arrived in the post!

Some things on the critical path will only become obvious when they arise but most can be built into the plan. The crucial thing is to let people know what the critical bits are so, if they are responsible for them, they know what the effect will be if they are late. Others need to know which bits they have to wait for before they can start work. A little bit of forethought and clear communication can avoid heated discussions, frustration and late delivery.

Once you have your plan of what needs to be done and your critical path you can schedule all the tasks to take you through to your delivery date. Till you get stuck and can't think what needs to happen next.....

A really effective way of planning that can help – especially when stuck – is to work backwards from your ideal goal.

For example, if I have to deliver a new software package by the end of December, I will need to have the client acceptance tests by the end of November to allow time for final adjustments. So internal testing will have to start by beginning of November. That means development will have to be complete by end of October. If I have a 1 September start date I have eight weeks for the development. If the end date can't move I might have to limit what I can deliver to what is feasible in that eight weeks, rather than the all singing, all dancing, whiz bang development I had originally planned.

Budgeting

A project that comes in on-time and on-budget is as rare as a perfect summer. We all set out with optimism and a real belief that it will happen and we make our plans accordingly. We are then surprised and disappointed when it doesn't work out that way. Budgets overrun and we wonder how it happened, much as we wonder where the rain is when we've just planted up a new flowerbed.

Budgets should always have some leeway in them for the things you have forgotten, the disasters that emerge or the miscommunication that always happens along the way.

Letting the people responsible for various tasks know what the budget is that they are working to is always a good idea and the sooner the better. Preferably before they order the individually hand-crafted, bejewelled, designer fountain pens as a giveaway on your exhibition stand at Manufacturing Today.

The team

Take a look at everyone in your project team and think about the role you want them to play.

Too many...

> ... cooks spoil the broth.
> ... projects fail because no-one knows what their roles are.

Take your pick. So be clear who is responsible for what, who the decision makers will be, who is going to manage, who is going to do what, who just needs to know what is going on and who needs to agree to something. Then tell them.

Sounds obvious but sometimes we don't do it because we don't want to offend someone who is expecting a bigger role or because we think everyone knows what is expected of them. At Impact Factory we think you can't clarify enough. Let everyone know where they stand and what's expected of them.

You may decide to adopt a laissez-faire management style, just assigning tasks and letting people get on with it. Great if that is your style. It is good for the confidence and self-esteem of the members of the project team to have a measure of independence and trust shown. But if there is a part of you that worries when you don't hear anything, or if you think that some members of the team might not have the confidence to speak out when things start to go pear shaped, for your own sanity you might want to consider a balance between how much you trust people to get on with things and how much reassurance you need that they will do it.

The balance is to make clear what **you** need to feel OK about letting go of the day-to-day detail. It takes a sizeable measure of will power and a good dose of allowing mistakes to happen, or sometimes just accepting that things won't necessarily be done the way you would do them or as well as you would do them (face it, who could do it as well as you?).

It can be very easy to rely on people to tell you when they need help - they won't most of the time, until they're glubbing down for the third time and all you see are the bubbles on the surface of the water. Putting in place some kind of support mechanisms such as regular scheduled check-ins and reviews, both individually and as a team can keep things in balance. Sometimes things need to be more formal, in larger projects with a buddy system and other things that can be built-in so that people feel well looked after.

The creative stuff

Ever set out on a project that you know will be great if only you knew where to start? Or maybe one where you need some ideas to get past a rather vague bit in the plan? So, thinking caps on and see what you can come up with. Great! But sometimes all anyone comes up with is the same old, same old. We have a few ideas for getting those creative juices flowing.

It's like a train setting off on a journey and just going down the same railway lines each time. If you want it to go by a different route try giving it a different starting point. So, to cut some new paths in the brain we start with something different.

There are lots of different techniques for brainstorming – we give you a couple of ideas here but feel free to come up with your own!

The jelly method

With this one you start with a word that has nothing to do with your project or the problem you are brainstorming. Like 'jelly'. Then you list all the properties of jelly- it's wobbly, sweet, different colours, fruity, children like it, good for parties, etc. Then you look at making connections between those properties and the subject, sometimes with a couple of other steps in between - stepping stones.

So, if you are looking at a project to redesign your office space you might go from wobbly to flexible to hot-desking. Or to a new concept in supportive seating. It doesn't matter if you can't see the 'logical' connection; the important thing is to generate lots of ideas that you can sift later.

The ridiculous

With this one you start with a ridiculous condition. So, for the office redesign project you might start with something like:

> The staff are all lobsters

OK so we get things like:

> Water tanks, special food piped in daily, temperature control, specially modified equipment, translation services…

Again, the more ridiculous the ideas the better because it might trigger a humdinger of an idea for something real along the way.

Inversion

Turn the world upside down. How could you make your project fail miserably? What would it take for the worst-case scenario to become a reality?

And then before you curl up in the kitchen in a foetal lump, turn it all over and see what you have to do to protect your project and make it a success. What could go right? If all went swimmingly well (indulge me) what might happen?

Take a look at the ideal outcome for your project and the ideal happenings along the way. Just thinking about the things that could go right might give you some ideas about how to make them happen.

Probability x impact = priority for plan B

Similarly putting some effort into thinking about what could go wrong allows you to put a plan B (C or D) in place. This is a really good idea when the probability of something going wrong is pretty high. Like the most crucial delivery being late – it's *always* the crucial deliveries that are late so plan for it.

Getting people on board

So, you have your Gantt charts, Prince 2, work package descriptions, critical paths and resource allocation sheets but what about the hearts and minds of the project team?

Tapping into what makes people tick is a sure-fire way to motivate them. Bribery is underrated as a management tool. You just need to figure out which bribe works best for each person! In our experience the list of things people say motivates them is delightfully varied. It includes things like praise or acknowledgement, challenge, responsibility, promotion, satisfaction of seeing a job through, achievement and learning something new. OK so money is usually in there too, but it is just one of many things and often not top of the list.

One thing is sure - if you can't find anything to motivate someone to get on with some part of your project then things will be a bit harder than if you can. So for the important bits on your critical path, it could be worth putting some effort into working out why they should care.

Especially true when you have no direct control over the people or resources concerned. You might need a bit of kit that Fred in supplies keeps under lock and key or a few weeks of Jane's time from IT and she is overloaded with other work. So how do you get what you want?

Well, who has the say so? Having worked out who the person is that you need to be nice to you have to see things from their point of view. Fred may be precious about the bit of kit because it is costly to replace or because other people haven't brought it back when they borrowed it. Acknowledging how Fred sees the world is a good starting point for the discussion.

Is there anything you can offer to the person you are trying to influence that might help? An assurance, extra resource, a favour returned? Think outrageously – bribery, corruption, illegal acts and then see if something real springs to mind – we definitely don't recommend the illegal!

The C Word

All the way through the project the key to success is often Communication - keeping people informed about deadlines, expectations, progress, changes etc. It may seem like a big job but the job will be bigger if you don't. Cleaning up after a miscommunication, or a missed communication, often takes much longer than telling people stuff from the start.

It's a really good idea to have a communications plan in place right from the off and review it just as you do your project plan; 'What's worked, what hasn't, what else do we need to do?'

Getting heard upwards, downwards, sideways

Occasionally you want to get a message through to someone higher up the chain. If you have ever felt like a voice crying in the wilderness at this point, then take some comfort from the fact that you are not alone – that's the problem really. There are so many others trying to get the attention of that person you might as well be crying in the wilderness. In fact, that's not a bad idea because at least it would be something different and that's what you need to get noticed above the general hubbub of lost souls needing the bosses attention.

So take responsibility for being heard, make your message clear and concise then SHOUT. Not literally (unless you think it might help) but get your message across in a way that gets the attention of your target audience.

If you're communicating downwards or sideways its not that different. Being concise helps, as does being absolutely clear about what you want the person to do. Put some attention on how you want the message to be received for a really impactful delivery

Monitoring

Your project is underway, you have communicated well and often, things are taking their proper course so you can sit back and relax, right? Wrong!

It's a bit like spinning plates, you have to be constantly looking for the one that's about to drop off, slow down or spontaneously combust (it happens!).

Monitoring the progress of your project, keeping a wary eye on the areas where problems are likely to arise and anticipating difficulties ahead of time can save time and grief later.

Even if everything is going to plan it is important to let people know. We have seen many projects lose momentum because the project manager has sat back when everything is going to plan. Keep your project in the front of everyone's mind with regular progress reports.

The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men….

(…and contractors who don't deliver on time, reports that don't get written, deadlines that don't get met, people who don't show up, promises that aren't kept. Etc., etc., etc.)

When it doesn't go according to plan or someone/something throws a spanner in the works…

PANIC!!!!

Alternatively, take a deep breath, notice that this happens to other people too and decide how you want to handle whatever disaster has occurred. At this point you may have to put plan B into operation but if this is an unforeseen disaster then you may want to stand back from it and take a new look. And by that we don't mean looking for someone to blame for the sorry mess.

Taking Care of Your People

Do you like to be thanked for putting in an effort on something? How often does it happen?

If what we hear is anything to go by, then not nearly enough as we would like. When we look at what motivates people acknowledgement is almost always on the list and often near the top. So taking the time to acknowledge a job well done is worth a few moments of your time.

Even if things haven't gone so well it's worth making the effort to give feedback. At Impact Factory we like to think about feeding something in someone.

So, what is it you would like to feed in your project team or in one individual? A sense of…. achievement, urgency, pride, responsibility, etc. Choose the impact you want and then deliver your message holding that as the intended effect and see what happens.

Take a look at the other stuff that motivates your team. Is there anything you can do part way through your project to make sure they stay motivated through to a successful conclusion? This is especially important if you have had a disaster or two along the way. What has gone right? What successes can you celebrate so far? Who has gone the extra mile?

One of the things that keeps people motivated and pulling together is the sense of having some say in what is going on so try getting input from the team on how they think things have gone and what the future direction should be. So why not let them have it?

The End is in Sight – Now What?

Imagine the church roof is fixed, the new product is launched or the kitchen is fully installed and operational. What do you do now?

Most end-of-project reviews will take a look at lessons learnt and they usually focus on what went wrong and how to do better next time. A good thing to do. We feel that knowing what went right and how you did it is maybe even more productive – it means you have more chance of doing it again!

Take a look at all the things you have achieved, how you (the team did it) and then celebrate your success: a slap up meal together, a bottle or two of bubbly, a bonus, a box of sinful chocolates, an extra day's leave. Doesn't matter what - just make sure you celebrate! For your next project you just might find that people come with a level of motivation already because they know that you will end on a high.

Talking of your next project – the new widget the research department wants to launch, the church organ or the bathroom, off you go again with a bundle of experience under your belt. So what will you do this time? How can your next project contribute to your personal goals and build on your success so far?

Before you get carried away with the excitement of breaking new ground, you might want to consider giving your brain a break. Too often people just plunge themselves into projects or juggle more than one and feel they have to keep at it and at it until it's done. They come in early, work late and as we know can get less productive the more they work on it.

So, give yourself a break. Take an hour to walk in the park, or a day to do mindless paperwork or filing, play computer games, phone a friend, do Sudoku, go for a swim - pretty much anything that allows the right brain to have some breathing space and gives the left brain a rest for a while.
Even a short break can recharge the batteries and have you back rearing to go on your next ambitious undertaking. Good luck!

If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on project management,
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