What is a project manager?

Ervin Munir clarifies the role of the project manager and its relationship with other key roles.

To answer the question in the title, we must first understand what a project is. It is a sequence of interrelated activities undertaken by people to achieve a specific end-result, it has a start and an end – it is not ongoing, and it has time, cost and/or quality success criteria.

A project manager is someone who manages a project to its successful conclusion. To do this they:

- plan and estimate
- control time, quality and cost
- minimise surprises
- motivate project team members
- reduce risk, uneasy feelings, doubt and stress
- make effective use of resources
- communicate
- manage change
- generate confidence and credibility.

Complexity doesn't matter

Project management in industry is often equated to large complex projects involving the building of something physical (like a building or a ship) or the production of something complex (like a computer system). However, the principles of project management remain constant regardless of the size and complexity of the project.

I project managed my wedding. There, I've said it, and I feel a lot better for doing so! I have been holding the secret for far too long, and it is about time I let it out! Confession is good for the soul.

I planned it and held a project kick-off meeting with the key people involved. The team comprised; my wife-to-be, my mother, and two friends of ours. I used a flip chart, defined the objectives of the project, and got agreement from the team. Team members were assigned to tasks and everyone (including 3rd-party suppliers) knew what they were doing and when.

As the project progressed, I communicated with team members and 3rd-parties and tracked tasks by adjusting end-dates and applying progress. Based on this updated plan, I communicated with the project team members and 3rd-parties regarding changes to task dates and deadlines.

By doing this, my wife and I felt little stress, everything happened on schedule and to our satisfaction, and we had a great romantic day.

The project definition

If you do nothing else as a project manager, you must define the project and ensure that everyone interested and involved understands the same definition. The vehicle for achieving this common understanding is the production of the project definition document. Production (as with our wedding) is often a group exercise involving:

- Project sponsor
  - budget holder
  - champion
  - ensures project delivers business benefit
  - arbitrator
  - enabler for project manager
- Customer(s)/stakeholder(s)
  - who benefit from, or are affected by, the project
- Project manager
- Team member(s)
  - carry out project tasks

Typically the content includes: the project's history/background and overall purpose, key people/roles involved, objectives relating to time/cost/quality, key benefits, deliverables included/excluded, risks, assumptions, a plan, and some clarification of how the project will be managed.

All parties must sign off this document, preferably before doing any more work. Without this definition everything else you do as a project manager is and will be flawed. Armed with it, you and the project team can proceed with more confidence and belief that the project will reach a successful conclusion.

Some problems

Research has shown that even when good project management practices are followed, there is a need for more formal approaches to resource management and project progress tracking.

Your project is not being carried out in isolation within your organisation. Some of your team members are also assigned to other project or operational tasks and you cannot assume that they are available to your project 100%. It is not easy to spot that Chris is overloaded from next Thursday, and this lack of information causes many projects to fail.

In addition, keeping your project plan up to date is time-consuming and research has shown that many project managers do not bother. Often, the project plan is updated only when someone important asks for a progress report.

To overcome these problems you must be committed to the project management process, and you must consider using software tools to enable the project manager to keep their project plans up to date, to support the emerging role of the resource manager so that they can manage their resources effectively, and to provide a practical way for team members to report progress.

Conclusion

Adopting a project management approach within organisations is not easy. Many people do not understand the benefits of managing projects properly. In some organisations, a standard approach to project management and a level of maturity have already been achieved. In others, it will be down to you to learn and adopt a project management approach and prove to the people around you that this benefits the organisation.

However, you will still meet people who ask
'What has project management ever done for us?'
'Well, at least we knew what we were doing on the project and when.'
'And, the project actually finished on time.'
'And, the client was so impressed with the professional way we carried out the project, they have asked us to do another one.'
'Ok, Ok, apart from the fact that we knew what we were doing, and the project finished on time and we are going to make more money, what has project management ever done for us?'

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