

Maximizing Project Success

January Column: Kicking-Off a Project

by: Paula K. Martin, CEO, Martin Training Associates

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In my article entitled, *Curing Meeting Madness*, I talked about taking control of your meetings and one of the most important meetings you have on a project is the kick-off meeting. Kick-off sets the stage for the entire project. Kick-off is the first opportunity the entire project team has to get together and in some cases, it's the first time a team member has met you or the other people on the team. And, kick-off is where the project planning begins and it's also the first step in the team development process (forming).

What is the key characteristic of the forming stage of team development? Questions. Everyone begins a project with lots of questions such as:

- ✓ What is this project all about?
- ✓ What will my role be in the project?
- ✓ What will be required of me? How much work will I have to do? Will I have time to do it?
- ✓ Will I be successful?
- ✓ Who is the project manager? What will he/she be like to work with?
- ✓ Who else is on the team? Do I know any of them? What will they be like to work with?
- ✓ Are they bringing in coffee? When's lunch?

It is during the kick-off meeting that team members begin to get these questions answered and usually they are answered based on first impressions. That is why the kick-off meeting is different than any other meeting in the project; opinions are formed and they are very slow to change once formed.

The kick-off meeting is your opportunity to set the stage for the entire project or at least to launch the project in the right direction. Here are some tips for running an effective kick-off meeting:

1. Take the time to plan the meeting properly.
2. Include team introduction and development activities in the agenda.
3. Conduct a meeting that's interactive, having people actively participate in the meeting. Participation helps people feel a sense of ownership and commitment to the project.
4. Be conscious of the tone you are setting for the project. People will be listening less to what you say than how you say it.

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5. Be conscious of the management style you want to use for the entire project and make sure you're effectively using that style at the kick-off meeting. For example, if you're going to make all the decisions on the project, make that clear from the beginning. People appreciate consistency – it's predictable. What people don't like is surprises.
6. Lay out the ground rules for the project. If your style is to be collaborative, then have the team work together to come up with the ground rules. If your style will be directive, then you'll want to hand out the ground rules and review them with the group.
7. Make sure you clearly convey why this project matters to the organization. Have the sponsor or other members of management attend the meeting if this will help the team members understand why they should care about this project.
8. Set expectations.
9. Explain the planning process so they know what to expect.

All too often, the project manager is eager to just get on with planning and skips some of the more important elements of getting the project off on the right foot. These elements include launching the team process by addressing who is involved and how they will work together, making sure everyone knows the destination for the project and why it's important to get there, together; and setting expectations for how the project will be run and how people will work together.

So, the next time you get ready to launch of a new project, invest in the time it takes to plan and conduct a really successful kick-off meeting. It's one of the most important meetings you'll have for the entire project.

Paula Martin is the CEO of Martin Training Associates (MTA), the developers of the Project Management Evening Certificate program at Northeastern University. MTA offers in-house training in project, matrix and meeting management. For more information call 866-922-3122.