

Maximizing Project Success

March Column: Principles to Live By

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Let's talk about principles this month. To me, principles are the lighthouse beacon that guides your way through the rough seas of any project. Before you batten down the hatches with the how-to's and tools, it's important to keep your perspective on what's really important. Let's review the first set of principles for managing any project and we'll cover the rest next time.

Principle No. 1: Never begin a project without a charter. Even if you have to write the charter yourself and then get it reviewed and signed off by your sponsor, it's important to have a charter. Why? Because it's the guiding document for planning. Without a charter, you're planning based on unverified assumptions and that's a dangerous sport because it creates rework and frustration during the very important planning process.

Principle No. 2: Investing in planning saves time in execution. Too many people (not any of you I'm sure) believe that planning is a waste of time. "Let's just get on with the REAL work," they say. Just as investing in the initiating process saves time in planning, investing in planning saves time in execution. More importantly, taking time in planning means you're more likely to create the deliverables that the customer really wants and needs.

Principle No. 3: Every project has two basic objectives: first, to satisfy the customer and secondly, to do so as efficiently as possible. The project must be focused on the customer – he or she is why the project exists in the first place. Don't get give lip service to this principle. Involve the customer. Invite them to be on the team. Do a thorough job of gathering requirements, using a participative methodology. Communicate constantly. Don't move forward without the customer's blessing. Communicate constantly. Ask for feedback continually. Oh, and did I mention communicate constantly? Yes, I guess I did.

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Principle No. 4: Involving the team in the planning and monitoring processes creates understanding, buy-in and commitment. People understand what they participate in creating. Cheating people out of the opportunity to participate in creating the plan and monitoring the project robs them of a sense of ownership of the project. It robs them of the enjoyment of being part of a highly functional team. It diminishes their sense of accomplishment when the project is a success, because it's not really theirs, it's yours. When you do the planning on your own and then hand it down to the team, you place that old monkey (more like a gorilla) squarely on your back. The team feels little sense of responsibility. It's your project, not theirs. The same holds true during monitoring and controlling. If you do the problem solving, you own the project. Share that gorilla with the team. You'll create less stress for yourself and more enjoyment for them.

Principle No. 4: The project leader manages the process, not the content. There are actually two concurrent processes that must be led and managed: the project management process and the team process. If you follow principle number three, then you're using a collaborative process for project management. Your job is to lead the team through the steps of creating a project plan and then monitoring and controlling that plan. At the same time, you need to be leading the team through the stages of team development: forming, storming, norming and performing. If you do a good job of that, then you'll enter the fifth stage of mourning. If you don't do a good job, team members will gleefully leave the project, hoping never to return.

Apply these principles by building skills and assembling tools to support them. It's the fundamentals that count. Most projects fail because of people and politics, not because you failed to do a Monte Carlo analysis. Focus on what's important and you'll undoubtedly be a success.

Paula Martin is the CEO of Martin Training Associates (MTA), which specializes in project management, change accountability and matrix management. See our website for information on our new Quick Guide series, the first of which is titled: *Sponsoring a Project*. For more information call 866-922-3122.