

## EDUCATION

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# How to ensure project success

**P**rojects are a crucial microcosm of any business. Projects are mini-enterprises. They consume money and create benefit. Consider the percentage of your organization's dollars invested in projects and the amount of profit that is generated through projects. Many projects represent a substantial investment.

Let's talk about five things that you can do to ensure project success.

### PLAN INTELLIGENTLY

What can you do to create a practical plan? Don't bite off more than you can chew. A project needs to be sub-divided into smaller tasks until they are of a size which produces one deliverable, can be managed by one coordinator, and is defined by only one active verb. Plan down to a detail level for a short planning horizon. Make high-level approximations for the rest of the project. With the new information and decisions made after completing the first planning horizon, plan in detail for the next planning horizon and re-evaluate the approximations for the work which remains in the project and for the final targets. This sets attainable expectations, prevents reforecasting, and saves time.

Don't leave accountability undefined. Accountability is the designation of one person to coordinate the work of every task. The accountable person sees to it that the effort is completed on time, within budget, and of the quality promised. And if this is not possible, the accountable person communicates with the appropriate people to resolve the hurdle that may cause project failure.

### INSPECT WHAT YOU EXPECT

How will you know that your plan is on track? Continually review every output that was created during the planning phase of a project. Examples include scheduling, staffing, budgeting, defect control, change control, and risk management.

### DEAL WITH CONFLICT

How can you ensure that conflicts

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contribute positively to the project? Encourage a culture of "appropriate" conflict. Conflict will occur. Attempting to stifle conflict will not be successful nor will it be productive. The operative word here is appropriate.

Learn techniques to participate in "appropriate conflict." Appropriate conflict means being able to approach disagreement in a tactful and diplomatic way. Speak the correct words using a professional tone. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying.

Ask a competent facilitator to help. Sometimes having a third party, who can "direct" the discussion, avoids tempers flaring, hurtful words from being said, and a stalemate, which will be almost impossible to break.

Establish an escalation process before the project begins. No matter how articulate and diplomatic folks are, the conflict may not be resolved. Escalating to a mediator or an arbitrator may be necessary. Predefine who the person will be and the process for escalation.

### RECOVER A TROUBLED PROJECT

How can you bring a failing project back on the track? Call a time-out. Stop the project until you have a chance to isolate the serious problems. Get everyone involved in the analysis of the trouble and keep everyone informed. Focus on what needs to be accomplished in order to move on.

Check internally first. The plan may have been incorrect from the beginning, team members may not be contributing, and/or money has not been spent wisely, etc.

Check externally next. Project priorities may have changed, technology is different than anticipated, and/or the economic conditions have reversed.

Solve only the major problems. Don't try to solve everything or the project will never get back on track. Address the biggest hurdles; assign the team to fix what they can. It is everyone's job, not just yours. Allow the rest of the project to move on slowly while the problems are rectified.

### COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

How can you guarantee the success of these points? Think through and document a communication plan. The mere act of following the plan will solve most of the problems caused by poor communications. Ask each person involved what they need to get from the project and what they expect to give to the project. Responses to this dialogue clarify what information is needed and when.

Inspecting what you expect, appropriate communication, practical project planning, effective project recovery, and proper conflict management are five areas which, when handled correctly, will ensure project success.

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*Joan was recognized by the Project Management Institute as one of the 25 most influential women in Project Management in 2006. For more information, visit [www.usfca.edu/regions/northbay](http://www.usfca.edu/regions/northbay).*