

Reflections on Project Management (Example)

Technical and organizational aspects

Rather than deciding on a set of goals and then assigning people to different roles, in the case of our project, these processes happened in tandem. As each of us gravitated toward certain roles, it became more clear which deliverables would become prioritized and which would be secondary. To help keep myself focused, I drafted a very general project vision statement and collected statements from the other group members about their goals for the semester.

This left me with the job of laying out the calendar and work plan for the semester. This was a really daunting task for me given that I am still new to the field and did not have the skills to conceptualize how all the pieces fit together. From that process, however, I have learned that PMs do not need to know every detail of how the project will go from the outset.

When it came to the calendar, I basically just worked backward. I started by establishing our launch date. Then, in conversation with Wayne and Bethany, I worked to figure out the approximate dates when each task needed completion. Leon and others recommend that PMs work with team members to establish deadlines and goals rather than just dictating them. While this is a good idea, it didn't work so well for our project—mostly due to the fact that all of us were novices and not really sure how much time various tasks required. I did, however, collect information from everyone with regard to their commitments over the semester. I wanted to know when people would be leaving for the summer, when they would be out of town for a significant period, and if there were other commitments that might take time away from the project. That information helped me to set up the calendar and to know when people were most and least available throughout the last few months.

Although we did not have to worry about financial resources or the allocation of equipment or software, I want to say something briefly about time and space. One of our most important resources has been the graduate lounge. Often our best work happened when we were in that shared space for a good chunk of time. As the semester quieted down, we found more time to be in the lounge collectively. I am happily in awe of the amount of work and progress that we accomplished in the last three weeks of our project. Had I known how valuable that shared time and space would be, I would have done more to institute habits of collective work meetings early on.

Deciding what counted as a task or a milestone was also difficult initially. Personally, I found that it helps to have the project broken down into small enough parts that you can actually track progress from week to week. If tasks are too large, there is little to check off of the “to do” list until the project approaches completion. In the end, each of our core deliverables became a milestone to which a list of issues (or tasks) was attached.

Know your team

I want to talk about one of the aspects of project management, which can be more difficult to articulate and to learn. While each project needs a timeline, deadlines, and clear goals, a project manager does more than keep track of the organizational aspects of the project. The way I see it now, a successful project manager is able to facilitate the coordination of her team in a way that maximizes the team's potential.

This involves both the ability to be a liaison between various aspects of the project and team members and the ability to learn how each team member works and which kind of guidance (or opinion) is either useful or disruptive. For example, I found that some group members preferred very specific guidance on tasks, while others preferred just general instruction and to be left (more or less) to their own devices. In this way, knowing your team members and how they work is an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to identifying milestones and tasks to track.

While it may be true that anyone with decent organizational skills can set up a calendar and track tasks, I think the best project managers know and understand how a team works and can use that knowledge to shape their own approach to leadership.

Communication

Much to my surprise, communication with the rest of the team was one of the more difficult aspects of this semester. This caught me completely off guard because I actually think that I have pretty good communication skills: I don't shy away from talking about topics just because they are uncomfortable, I write clearly, and I make an effort to be sure I am hearing and understanding others. And yet, I found communication challenging.

After a lot of reflection, there are at least three related issues that contributed to my communication woes. First, I assumed that others would react to the communication of various sentiments as I would react. If someone asks me to "do something if I have time," I just about always get it done. I eventually realized that my team members were not all as overly socialized and prone to guilt as myself. When I included statements such as "if you have time," they took me literally (as they should). If I really needed something done, I had to learn to drop the conditional statement from my emails.

However, this first point is not entirely removed from two other contributions to my communication troubles: insecurity about my own knowledge in the field and a worry over seeming bossy.

As crunch time neared, I learned to just articulate explicitly what needed doing. Our progress improved once I was able to just drop all my concerns and do my job by telling the team what to do.