Software Project Management

The Role of the project manager in the project management process

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*“The role of the project manager in the project management process.”*

The role of the project manager in the project management process can vary from project to project and different skill sets are required based on the size and type of project. There is one constant however the project manager must possess strong interpersonal and people management skills. Anantatmula states that the project managers role is *“of great importance in motivating people and creating an effective working environment in order for the project team to meet greater challenges”.* (Anantatmula, 2010)Teams fail and individuals fail, neither being desirable by a company, identifying signs of these failures and preventing them where possible is one of the key skills project managers should possess. Effective project management requires a combination of skills including technical project management competencies, interpersonal, and leadership behaviours. (Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015) These people and team management skills are not exclusive of technical skills and aptitudes required to successfully fulfil a leadership role in the project management process.

Outside of team and people management which always need management, the extent of a project manager’s role is dependent on the type of project and the organisational structure of the project. Regarding organisational structure the biggest impact it can have on the project manager is the level of autonomy they will have on the process, varying from little or no authority to almost total, organisational structure also effects how many projects they are responsible for. The level of financial and budgetary control possessed by the project manager is also greatly influenced by the organisational structure and is not necessarily part of every project manager’s role. There are some constants that a project manager has at least some involvement with and responsibility for, time management, cost management and quality management (Schwalbe, 2007). According to Schwalbe*,”Project managers work with project sponsors, a project team, and other people involved in a project to meet project goals”*, time, cost and quality are fundamental to these goals.

Meeting these goals involves the project manager in risk and cost management, schedule and work breakdown management, error prevention and detection management plus quality assurance management along with human resource and people management at a minimum. Performing these roles effectively can be difficult and a good project manager will take a systematic approach to the challenge, employing a systems oriented philosophy, systems analysis and systems management (Schwalbe, 2007).

Project management can be viewed as a number of interlinked processes including initiation, planning, execution, monitoring/controlling and closing processes. One of the primary responsibilities of a project manager in the initiation phase is gathering requirements and development of a preliminary scope statement, both of which are vital to the success of any project (Schwalbe, 2007). Good requirements assist a project manager to tie a customer down to specifics, remove unmanageable expectations and ultimately reduce conflict (Clarity, n.d.)These requirements form the basis for the preliminary scope statement where a project is broken down into smaller milestones (deliverables), realistic goals are laid out and priorities established. Managed correctly requirements gathering and scope statements mitigate against one of the most common project problems, ‘scope creep’. Along with unclear requirements lack of an adequate change control process contributes to scope creep, implementing an agreed change control process is the responsibility of the project manager in agreement with the project team and senior management. Once agreed it is important that the project manager ensures that the change control process is followed. Adequate change control processes enable teams and individuals to function more efficiently as it removes any ambiguity surrounding who is responsible for managing change, there is a clear process that must be followed.

On completion of initial scope and requirements documents a project manager will develop a comprehensive project plan. The project plan guides execution and may include detailed deliverables, identification of any constraints and assumptions, breakdown of work, and detailed scheduling of tasks. Assembly of the project team can be a pre-requisite to creating a project plan and is arguably the most important aspect of project management, assuming that project teams are not pre-assigned by a company/organization. Choosing a team that has the skills to complete the project is obviously of high importance to a project manager, but choosing a team that will function together is the primary concern. Once the project team is established, effective communication is vital, the project manager should take responsibility for this, clearly defining and communicating tasks, particularly if there is an overlap of team members with other projects. Cynthia K. West highlights lack of visibility of day to day tasks as one of the four main reasons projects fail, *“The most frequently heard complaint from team members is that they lack visibility on a day to day basis about the tasks that they are supposed to work on. If they are working on multiple projects at one time, they are often confused about task priority”* (West, 2013). An overworked project manager can contribute to this lack of communication, in larger organisations a project manager may be responsible for multiple projects and have difficulty in prioritizing. This difficulty in prioritization can filter down to team members resulting in overworked individuals ultimately leading to team members leaving organisations thus disrupting project schedules. Managing themselves is highly important for a project manager, and they should be able to tell upper management when their workload is too heavy and goals will not be achieved. Unfortunately this is not always possible due to the culture of an organisation as West mentions, “*many project managers do not, either in fear of losing their jobs, or not wanting to 'rock the boat.' The lack of vision and leadership at the top of the organization flows downward so that project managers are managing more projects than they should.”*

The project plan once completed should be the roadmap for successful completion of any project. The project manager must ensure the plan is followed and any deviations are as previously stated part of an agreed change control process. Work breakdown and subsequent task scheduling comprise the most important aspects of the plan. Once the project team is assembled the project manager must assign staff to the tasks their skillset is most suited for. Scheduling of these tasks can then be completed in conjunction with the applicable individuals and teams, this consultation gives individuals a sense of ownership which has been identified as a positive factor in successful projects. Re-iterating the importance of roles and responsibilities, proper work breakdown and scheduling removes ambiguity and guards against many of the main reasons projects fails. Writing for Engineering Ireland, Dermot Hore suggests the major reasons projects fail can be reduced to the following.

* Poor planning
* Unclear goals and objectives
* Scope creep / Change Control
* Unrealistic time or resource estimates
* Lack of executive support & user involvement
* In appropriate skills

(Hore, 2007)

Clearly correct team building, planning and scheduling will significantly reduce the likelihood of these becoming an issue. The exception being lack of executive support which is a cultural issue in some organisations as opposed to a project managers issue. Successful project managers when scheduling will include significant extra time (lag) in the schedule, doing this allows for flexibility and room for adjustment in the event of problems or unplanned for issues arising. Management of time efficiently implicitly benefits cost and quality management. There should be no requirement to incur the cost of extra staff so that a badly scheduled project can finish on time, also quality should be higher when adequate time is allowed to complete tasks. Furthermore achieving successful completion of projects on schedule enhances the reputation of a company potentially leading to increased business over time.

Managing and monitoring project execution once plans and schedules are complete is the chief role of the project manager in the process. Problems invariably occur, many that are known or can be anticipated via a comprehensive risk and risk management plan. Oracle in a whitepaper published in 2011 argue that lack of risk management is one of the most under reported areas of project failure. They further argue that risk management must be proactive not reactive, *“Too often, problems are addressed reactively, causing schedules and budgets to be exceeded. This results in schedule slippage, budget overruns, and excessive staff overtime and burnout”* (Oracle Corporation, 2011). Risk management planning should form a component of the project manager’s responsibility with particular emphasis on dealing with the occurrence of identified risks. Risk management can identify and cater for known risks that can be identified in the requirements gathering and project planning phases and the project manager should educate their team on the importance of risk management, *“The best practice recommendation is to utilize an integrated and proactive risk management approach for all project efforts. This includes developing and publishing the Risk Management Plan and educating the entire project team on the benefits of performing risk management”* (Oracle Corporation, 2011). One of the key abilities a project manager should possess is how they deal with an unknown (unidentified) ‘risk’ occurring, often a crisis in the project. Leadership and people management skills are essential to the project manager in these situations, if the project manager can’t remain objective and outwardly calm then it is unlikely the project team will. Some risks are quite common and must be managed efficiently by the project manager, time and tight schedules have been discussed previously and are the most prevalent. Staffing problems are a common issue faced by project managers, in the event of staff members becoming unavailable for any reason the project manager should have plans in place to allow for this. These plans can include having ample lag built into the schedule or having a team comprising multi-disciplined staff allowing for appropriate re-allocation. Depending on the project, assessing and managing risk associated with budget, contracts and client expectations and demands are potential components of the project manger’s role.

The opening paragraph of this paper mentions people management skills as being of vital importance to a project manager. Dealing with every aspect of the project manager’s role in the project management process in a paper of this length is difficult, resultantly a number of key responsibilities have been identified and discussed. Leadership provided by the project manager is what unifies these responsibilities, the project managers overall role in the process is that of a leader, being a good leader implies possessing strong people management skills. Project managers should lead by example, lead in a fair but decisive manner, lead by possessing and applying ability and technical skills and lead not only their teams but also higher level management and customers throughout the project management process. Communicating effectively with all stake holders is an important aspect of this leadership responsibility. Developing a clear communication plan is the responsibility of the project manager, including a schedule for reports and meetings as deemed necessary. Lack of communication with stakeholders has been identified as another reason that projects fail (Altahtooh & Emsley, 2014). Leadership applied correctly should successfully accomplish the primary targets of the project manager, delivering a successful project on time, within budget and meeting the required quality standards.

The project management process is not complete with the outwardly visible conclusion of a project, the process should continue with a review of the entire project. Project managers are responsible for this review process, where successes and failures are identified and lessons learned noted. The goal of the review process from the project manager’s perspective is to include successful components in future projects and attempt to improve on and eliminate elements deemed to have failed. The ability to be self-critical in this process is important because sometimes what went wrong is attributable to the project manager. Improving the ability to fulfil all project management roles should be constantly enhanced by the adoption of lessons learned from the review process in any future projects.

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