

FLAWLESS PROJECT LAUNCH PRACTICES

The Bridge from Business Opportunity to Project Execution

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Introduction

According to the Project Management Institute's *Guide to the Project Management Book of Knowledge*, (PMBOK® Guide), project initiation is the process of formally defining and authorizing a project or project phase. In most cases, a project is not formally initiated until after completion of a feasibility study, a preliminary plan, a business case, or some equivalent form of analysis during a discovery phase.

Discovery

Best practice calls for virtually all types of projects, including new product development and technology projects (software and hardware development/enhancement), to undergo a formal discovery and conceptualization phase. The discovery phase formulates the idea for a new product or service. The project proposal documentation should be accompanied by competitive analysis, cost vs. benefit analysis, business area impact, and corporate strategy alignment. A governance body comprised of senior executive management often performs portfolio management, giving authorization to launch projects based on discovery phase outputs, project prioritization, project funding, and ongoing adjustments to the project portfolio.

Facilitated Project Initiation

Project initiation addresses the processes from completion of the discovery phase and approval of a concept for a new project, until authorization is received to form the project team and begin detailed planning. This phase of the project management life cycle ensures that sufficient information is obtained and examined

to make a sound decision regarding pursuit of the opportunity, and investment in requirements gathering and project planning. This phase also identifies key stakeholders and responsibilities for project management oversight, and establishes the work effort as an authorized and funded project. Initiation includes determining:

- Project goals and objectives
- Project stakeholders
- Scope of the work effort
- Project approach
- Project assumptions and constraints
- Performance criteria
- High-level cost and time estimates
- Key resources requirements
- Project funding
- Subcontractor selection, if relevant

Formal documents are created to set customer expectations, gain commitment, and receive project stakeholder approval. The information from initiation is essential input to the project planning process.

The Facilitated Project Kickoff Workshop

An industry best practice to quickly and successfully launch a project through the initiation and planning processes is the facilitated project kickoff workshop. The kickoff workshop serves as the flagship event that formally launches the initiative.

The workshop is conducted during the initiation process described in the project scope management section of the PMBOK®. This workshop is a facilitated meeting in which key stakeholders and decision-makers converge to define critical aspects of the project. This meeting allows the project manager to quickly define the full project scope and create a charter document with the consensus of the key stakeholders. This charter document then serves as an agreement or contract among the project team, the project sponsor, and key project stakeholders, thereby providing a strong foundation from which to



begin planning project details.

While the project kickoff workshop is formally facilitated to document project objectives, scope, and approach, the project plan and detailed schedule are then created through similarly facilitated (albeit less formal) follow-on workshops and planning sessions.

Workshop Process

The initiation workshop consists of three phases:

- **Workshop Preparation:** Prepare for the workshop and conduct interviews
- **Workshop Session:** Moderate the facilitated session
- **Completing Project Initiation:** Finalize the project charter and other initiating documentation, and obtain approval to proceed with project planning

It is imperative to move quickly into facilitated planning sessions to maintain the momentum built during the project kickoff workshop.

Workshop Purpose

The purposes of holding a facilitated project kickoff workshop are to:

- Formally launch the project to build a common understanding of the project definition, scope and approach
- Obtain stakeholder buy-in on the project objectives and scope
- Determine success measurements
- Build a strong project team with a common vision
- Finalize and present the project baseline in the form of a charter and related documentation for approval to move forward with the project.

Workshop Activities

The Project Kickoff Workshop launches a project in a systematic and methodical manner. The workshop activities are geared towards creating, organizing, and revising critical project information captured in the project charter. Subsequently, the best practices brought into play in the project kickoff workshop should be used for further project planning sessions, such as creating the project plan, conducting risk-planning sessions, and building the detailed schedule.

During the workshop, stakeholders will:

- Identify and validate the business opportunity
- State the project mission
- Write the project objectives and measures of success
- Determine the scope in terms of major deliverables

- Define quality specifications
- Define assumptions and constraints
- Determine the human resource requirements
- Determine the material and equipment procurement needs
- Identify the preliminary milestone schedule
- Calculate a preliminary budget based on cost estimates
- List the major overall risks

Very large projects or programs may have a master program charter describing the program mission, objectives and scope and structuring the program into sub-projects. A senior management planning team usually develops this charter in a similar workshop session. Each sub-project within the master program will have its own project charter and kickoff workshop.

Planning Team

The project planning team should be selected and brought into the project before preparation work has been started for the Project Kickoff Workshop. The planning team members first review project discovery phase information to determine if all deliverables are complete. If the discovery phase deliverables are incomplete, the planning team must first complete the discovery documentation — at a minimum the business case must be in place and approved by the project sponsor.

The planning team interviews key project stakeholders, determines management directives, drafts the agenda for the workshop, creates the preparatory project charter and graphical work breakdown structure (WBS), resolves any outstanding issues, prepares and conducts the workshop, and completes the remaining project initiation activities outlined below.

Participants

The project manager should be assigned at this point so that he or she may play a major role in project initiation and planning. The project manager should attend the project kickoff workshop, as should technical and business subject matter experts and key stakeholders from groups or organizations that are involved in or impacted by the project. Since the purpose of the workshop is to make key decisions about the project structure, it is essential that the participants are empowered to make decisions for their organizations.

Quick-Start Project Launch Model

The Quick Start and the Traditional Initiation models are used to launch new projects. The Quick Start model should be used for projects that are straightforward, well-understood, low-risk and free from possible political conflicts. For the Quick Start Model, the duration for project initiation and planning is typically two to three weeks. Elements include:



- A planning team consisting of one facilitator and a master scheduler who fully understand the initiation and planning processes. This team will lead the initiation and planning effort during the full-group workshop session. They will then divide the group into planning teams to build detailed plans for major deliverables.
- A commitment by the key project planning participants to devote concentrated time to the initiation and planning effort.
- Workshop participants who have an understanding of project management, including the initiation and planning processes.
- An off-site facility to minimize distractions during the workshop session.

Traditional Project Launch Model

The model for project initiation and planning for a large, complex project generally requires a four to eight week development period. Components include:

- A planning team consisting of two facilitators and one master scheduler who fully understand the initiation and planning processes. The facilitator/scheduler team will conduct the Kickoff Workshop to complete the initiation process, then hold small group, facilitated sessions to complete the planning process.
- A commitment on the part of the stakeholders to devote two to three days to the initiation workshop and attend follow-on planning workshops to complete planning
- An off-site facility to minimize distractions during the workshop session.

The Project Charter

According to the *PMBOK®*, the project charter is “a document issued by the project initiator or senior management sponsor that formally authorizes the existence of a project and provides the project manager with the authority to apply organizational resources to project activities.” The purpose of the project charter is to define the products and services to be provided by the project and concisely describe the project scope and expectations. The charter formally recognizes that a project exists. It includes the business need that the project addresses, and provides a high-level product description.

Since the project charter is part of the baseline used for measuring and controlling changes, it is critical that the expectations and assumptions be clear and complete. The project charter is a powerful tool to help focus the project, and create synergy and a common approach among project stakeholders. The project charter also ensures that the project stakeholders share a common understanding of their roles in the project.

In addition, the project charter serves as the foundation for communication about the project. The workshop emphasizes completing this document thoroughly and accurately, setting the stage for detailed project planning. The project initiation workshop expands on the *PMBOK®* view of the charter as an internal “legal” document, identifying to line managers and others the project manager’s authority and responsibility, but also the management and/or customer-approved scope of the project. As such, the project charter contains a scope baseline, functions to be performed, the high-level milestone schedule, cost and time estimates, resource requirements, and other necessary tools.

Project Charter Contents

During the workshop, the following project charter components are created:

- Business need that the project addresses
- Product description
- Mission statement and objectives
- Scope statement and deliverables
- Graphical WBS, decomposed to deliverables that are one to two months of work for one to two people
- External and internal dependencies
- Project assumptions and constraints
- Human resource requirements, including names and titles attached to responsibilities
- Preliminary delineation of roles and responsibilities
- Support requirements from other organizations
- Authority and responsibilities of the project manager
- Major project milestones
- Preliminary budget and cost estimates
- Risk assessment
- Project control guidelines, including expectations for change control, budget, and project reports
- Desired flow of documentation and information
- Management approval of each project charter component

The project charter must be owned and approved by an external manager, such as the executive sponsor. Upon completion of the charter, the sponsor and other decision makers review the project scope, time and cost estimates, and determine whether to continue investment in the project by moving into the planning process.

Project Kickoff Workshop Process

The best practice presented is to conduct a project kickoff workshop as the capstone event of the project initiation process. This workshop is a facilitated, interactive session designed to develop a common view of the project. The workshop, together with follow-on facilitated planning sessions, provides an accelerated approach to project start-up.



This workshop is ideal for any project launch; it is indispensable if there are cross-functional stakeholders who are crucial to the project's success. This often means that a large number of participants may need to be involved. Coordinating and facilitating such a large group requires the workshop facilitator to have excellent planning and facilitation skills. It is therefore recommended that a professional facilitator, and an experienced and seasoned internal or external consultant, lead the effort. One or more co-facilitators assist in content presentation and breakout sessions. The workshop process calls for introduction of planning concepts and tools for learning purposes prior to applying the process in practice. Standard tools and templates are utilized to promote consistency across projects, and to facilitate management comparative analysis and project prioritization.

Workshop Preparation

In addition to arranging and scheduling logistics for the workshop, the project manager directs the planning team to review the business case and other discovery documents, and conduct one-on-one and small group interviews to capture a complete understanding of the project history. The information should be captured in a preliminary project charter and discrepancies should be logged in a preliminary issue log. These documents will be used during the project kickoff workshop for discussion and consensus building.

The initiation phase of the project should not be rushed. Considerable planning is needed for a successful project launch. Preparation for the kickoff workshop should begin several weeks before the session. Steps to be completed prior to the workshop include the following:

- Assemble planning team
- Interview project stakeholders
- Review project status
- Draft project charter, issue, and risk logs
- Schedule workshop session
- Complete final workshop preparations
- Set up for workshop

Workshop Session

During the project kickoff workshop, the stakeholders review and discuss the information required to build a strong foundation for the project. The drafted project charter document is refined and improved, and any outstanding issues, risks, and next steps are resolved during the initiation completion phase.

Most items in the workshop agenda correspond to a section of the project charter. A project kickoff workshop is designed to answer the following questions:

- *Why?*: Determine why the project exists from a business standpoint (mission, objectives, measures of success, management directives)
- *What?*: Determine what will be produced to meet the project objective (Scope/WBS)
- *Who?*: Determine who will produce the work products and how the project team must be organized to succeed. (project team structure, steering committee)
- *When?*: Determine the duration of the project (initial order of magnitude milestone schedule)
- *How?*: Determine the cost (initial order of magnitude in the initiation phase), and how the project will be controlled (quality, communication, risk, issues, product life cycle)

The following sample agenda is appropriate for a traditional project launch for a large, complex initiative.

Day One Agenda

The first day of the workshop is designed to introduce the team members, establish working relationships, set project goals and objectives (why), and define project scope (what).

Agenda items for Day 1 include:

- Workshop Opening
- Introductions
- Management Directives
- Current State of the Project
- Stakeholder Identification
- Values and Guiding Principles
- Ground Rules
- Project Management Overview
- Project Description
- Project Scope
- Wrap-up

Day Two Agenda

The second day of the workshop is designed to establish the remaining elements of the project foundation in terms of team structure (who), schedule (when), budget (how much) and operational procedures (how).

Agenda items for Day 2 include:

- Progress Review from Previous Day
- Project Organization
- Milestone Schedule
- Budget
- Quality Plan
- Communications Plan
- Wrap-up

Day Three Agenda

The third day of the workshop is designed to finalize the project

charter and begin to manage issues and risks.

Agenda items for Day 3 appear below.

- Review Progress from Previous Day
- Refine Project Charter Elements
- Review/Manage Issues
- Review/Manage Risks
- Workshop Wrap-up

Completing the Initiation Phase

The project initiation process is complete after key stakeholders have reviewed and approved the project charter, and senior management has authorized the project manager to proceed with the project. Once approved, the charter document is baselined and put under formal change control, and project planning begins. Finalizing and obtaining approval for the project charter may take anywhere from a few days to several weeks. It is important to establish a deadline date for project charter approval as soon as possible after the workshop.

Project Baseline

When the project charter is approved, it becomes one of the first components of the project baseline documentation (along with discovery phase documents). After that, changes to time, cost and scope are subjected to formal change control procedures. To control critical changes, change requests must be documented, evaluated, and formally approved by the project sponsor before they are incorporated into the project charter and other baselined documents.

The project manager should convene the project team and begin the planning process immediately upon project approval and funding. The successful completion of the planning phase provides the basis for execution and readiness to meet project goals.

Note: If the Quick-Start initiation and planning model is used, the project charter is usually approved along with the planning outputs (e.g. project plan, detailed schedule, detailed budget, etc.)

It is important to finalize the initiation process as rapidly as possible and quickly transition to planning. The longer it takes to build detailed project plans and begin tracking project activities against the plan, the more difficult it will be to manage and control the project.

Distribute the approved project charter to the stakeholders and assigned project team members. Critical charter elements include:

- Graphical work breakdown structure (WBS)
- Milestone schedule
- High-level project budget
- Initial risk management plan

Best Practices

Hold regular weekly team meetings and facilitated small-group planning meetings immediately after the kickoff workshop to review project requirements, develop more detailed project plans and schedules, and build a high-performing, committed project team. Several meetings will be needed to complete the detailed project plans and schedule.

Set up a project notebook (electronically and physically) that will serve as an archive for all project documentation.

Team Leadership Roles

The following discussion is provided to clarify the role of the project manager at different stages of team development. While the facilitator role is of utmost importance during the project initiation and planning phases, the project leader must adapt his or her style to fit team needs.

Understanding the importance of leadership skills for project managers is an emerging concept. It is now considered more appropriate for the project manager to be aware of the technical area of the project, rather than to be a technical expert. The project focus is on business rather than technical objectives. Projects are now viewed as technical problems solved with human intervention and collaboration.

Behavioral people skills are considered vital for project success. David C. Kolb, Ph.D. offers a five-stage team development model. Each stage has certain roles that the team leader must play to maximize team effectiveness. Each team leader role is accompanied by its corresponding skills, as shown in the table below.

Development Phase	Team Leader Role
TeamBuild	Facilitator
TeamLearn	Mediator
TeamTrust	Coach
TeamWork	Consultant
TeamFlow	Collaborator

Team Development Model, David C. Kolb, Ph.D.

Facilitator

The team leader is responsible for building a high-performing team. The project kickoff workshop facilitator provides the



foundation for the team to develop. Through the initial project kickoff workshop, the project manager begins to build the project team.

Many organizations look for consultants (either internal consultants from the project office, or external consultants from a project management consulting firm) to facilitate this most important kickoff workshop so the project manager can concentrate on content rather than the workshop process. Expert facilitation requirements include understanding group dynamics, running effective meetings, facilitating dialogue, and dealing with difficult behaviors. Skills include:

- Understanding individual differences, work styles, and cultural nuances
- Leading discussions and driving group consensus
- Building a sense of team
- Using and teaching collaborative skills
- Managing meetings
- Initiating projects by facilitating planning workshops

Mediator

Transitioning from facilitator to mediator poses a challenge for new team leaders because it requires the team leader to stop controlling the team. The team leader must recognize when conflict is emerging — as it always does in team development — and separate from it to mediate the situation. Although the team leader may not resolve the conflict, he or she must help the team members manage it. Skills include:

- Conflict management and resolution
- Problem-solving and decision-making techniques
- Idea-generation techniques

Coach

Coaching and mentoring takes place at both the individual and team levels. At this stage, trust has been established among team members, and communication is open and positive. The coach uses experiences, perceptions, and intuition to help change team member behaviors and thinking. Coaching involves:

- Goal-setting
- Teaching others how to give and receive feedback
- Team development and identify-building

Consultant

As the team begins to work well together, the team leader transitions into the consultant role, providing advice, tools, and interventions to help the team reach its potential. The team leader concentrates on nurturing the team environment and problem

solving. The role of a team leader as consultant involves:

- Assessing team opportunities
- Supporting and guiding the team to create a positive, effective team environment
- Aligning individual, team, and organizational values with strategic imperatives
- Fostering team spirit

Collaborator

Few teams achieve this level of teamwork and sustain it for long periods of time because it is so intense. At this point, both the work and the leadership is shared equally among team members. The lead role is handed off to team members as their expertise becomes the critical need during differing project phases. This level of teamwork requires the team lead to:

- Lead softly
- Share the leadership role
- Assume a peer relationship with team members

References

Professional Services

Management Concepts offers the following professional consulting services to assist organizations in launching and managing projects successfully:

- Flawless Project Launch Facilitation
- Building High-Performing Teams
- Professional Project Management Mentoring
- Implementing a Project Management Career Track

Education & Training

Management Concepts courses and seminars related to project initiation and planning include the following:

- Project Management Principles
- Techniques for Successful Project Management
- Integrated Cost and Schedule Control
- Managing Project Quality
- Leadership and Communication Skills
- Conducting Effective Project Team Meetings
- Project Procurement Management
- Project Risk Management
- Advanced Project Management
- Advanced Techniques for Enterprise Project Management

Publications — Team Building and Project Leadership

Sources for additional information on team leadership and team building concepts and techniques include the following:



Flannes, S.W., and Levin, G. (2001). *People Skills for Project Managers*. Vienna, VA: Management Concepts.

Kolb, David C. (1999) *Team Leadership*. Durango, CO: International LearningWorks.

Scholtes, P.R., Joiner, B.L., & Streibel, B. (2000). *The Team Handbook, 2nd ed.* Madison, WI: Oriel.

Publications - Project Launch

Sources for additional information on project launch tools and techniques include the following:

Dobson, M. (1996). *Practical Project Management*, Mission, KS: SkillPath Publications.

Project Management Institute (2004). *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

Haugan, G.T. (2002). *Effective Work Breakdown Structures*. Vienna, VA: Management Concepts.

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Rad, P.F. (2002). *Project Estimating and Cost Management*. Vienna, VA: Management Concepts.

