GRRREAT Projects! Seven Things to Get Right

By Jerry Manas, PMP

I was having breakfast the other day with my six-year old daughter, and for some reason my mind went back to the old television commercials for Frosted Flakes, where Tony the Tiger would shout, "They're Grrreat!" (courtesy of Thurl Ravenscroft, whose unmistakable deep voice also gave life to the song, "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch") And, in my own unmistakable sickness for equating everything to project management, I began to think of GRRREAT as an acronym for the seven things that I felt make the difference between good projects and great (oops, grrreat!) projects.

Here they are… the seven things that project managers need to get right (and usually get wrong):

Get the GOALS Right

Albert Einstein once said, "Confusion of goals and perfection of means seems, in my opinion, to characterize our age." It also seems, in my opinion, to characterize the way most projects are managed.

We can do all the planning in the world, but if our intended outcomes are not in line with the goals our key stakeholders are hoping to achieve, it is all for naught. Often, inadequate time, if any, is spent on ensuring that the primary stakeholders are aligned in what they are hoping to achieve from the project. In contrast, far too much time is spent on items that can usually wait for future releases, or that aren't very important to the stakeholders. It is the project manager's responsibility to determine the prioritized goals of the project, and to clarify it for the team.

Get the ROLES Right

Much like two baseball outfielders arguing, "I thought you had it!" "No, I thought you had it!" just after the ball dropped between them, I've seen way to many projects where people are confused as to who has the ball. This can all be avoided by clarifying the roles up front.

Not only is it important to clarify who's assuming which roles, it's equally important to make sure you have the right roles on the project to begin with. Often, the project manager spends too much time attempting to be a business analyst or a technician, which takes valuable time away from what a project manager should really be focusing on… relationships.

Get the RELATIONSHIPS Right

When good project go bad, as many do, a project manager must rely on relationships with others to make it successful. This is true whether calling in a favor from a key department, trying to get extra attention from a vendor, or helping the customer understand why a change of course is needed.

Great project managers know that good relationships are more important than how well you can calculate the critical path (forwards or backwards) or whether or not you used Earned Value. In the end, it is our relationships that will most often declare whether the project was viewed as successful or not. And it is our relationships that will make a bumpy road seem smooth.

Get the REQUIREMENTS Right

With an understanding of the key stakeholders' prioritized goals, the right supporting team who understands their roles, and some solid relationships, we'll have a good foundation for success. Then, ideally with the help of the customer and a good business analyst, we'll need to translate the goals into specific requirements where appropriate. "Where appropriate" is the operative phrase.

For projects with great uncertainty, or those that can benefit from creativity, it may suffice to know the goals and any specific requirements the customer may have. In that sense, the requirements can become the exception. Still, we need to use caution, and where feasible, or where accuracy is needed, we should document requirements and begin with the end in mind. As Yogi Berra says, "You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."

What I typically find is either of two extremes: requirements are documented arbitrarily---to the detriment of creativity and customer engagement, or requirements are completely bypassed and developers miss the mark.

Get the ESTIMATES Right

If goals and requirements address the question, "What do we need to do?" estimates address the question, "When can we do what it takes?" In nearly every service industry, customers want a sense of when they're going to receive the value they paid for. The more we know about what it needed, the better we can answer the question.

For projects with great uncertainty, it is not a bad idea to create two projects (or at least two independent phases): one to do the assessment and the other to implement the identified solution. Many project managers overlook this and commit to a date for which they have no idea if it can be met. For projects that are more predictable, we need to

make every effort to build expertise at developing sound estimates. This may mean examining past projects, soliciting expert opinion, using bottom-up estimates, or basing our estimates on measurable parameters (for example, using function point analysis).

Truth be told, more projects are late because the project manager agreed to an arbitrary deadline than because of bad estimates, but paradoxically, sound estimates make the best defense against arbitrary deadlines.

Get the AVAILABILITY Right

OK, so far we know what we want to accomplish, who we need to accomplish it, who's on our side, what our specific constraints are, and how long it should take us. One would think that it should be smooth sailing from here on. But one would be wrong. Even with the best of intentions, many projects go wrong because of availability problems. Either the project manager is spread so thin that he or she doesn't have the availability to manage the project correctly, or the resources that are assumed to be part of the project are pulled off onto other work. This happens more frequently than most project managers care to admit.

Project managers need to assure commitment, not only from their resources, but from their resources' bosses and their own boss. Project managers must be acutely aware of the time they'll need to manage the project successfully, and request help if needed. Likewise, they must make management aware that if they, or their resources, are pulled into other work, the project delivery date will suffer. This should ideally be part of any risk management plan, with appropriate contingencies.

If the worst does happen and key resources are unavailable, and if alternate resources or scheduling tricks aren't an option, then management needs to be made aware so that priorities can be rearranged. Never underestimate the probability and impact of availability (or lack thereof) on your project.

Get the TOOLS Right

Our last key item to get right is the set of tools we use to manage the project. Here, I use the word "tools" in a broad sense, to include software, methodologies, project management processes, forms, spreadsheets, and anything else a project manager may use as leverage. Overly complex or misapplied tools can slow down the greatest of project managers and completely overwhelm the mediocre ones.

Just as we must focus on goals when managing a project, we must focus on goals when selecting tools and processes. We need to stop and ask, "What are we trying to achieve, and is this the simplest way to accomplish it?" Organizations would be wise to observe project managers in action, and see which areas are in most urgent need of systematic improvements.

One tool that most projects can benefit from is some sort of collaboration tool (including a document repository). I'm also partial to mind-mapping software, which is versatile enough to allow for collaborative brainstorming, WBS development, creating presentations, and a host of other functions. I call it "the project manager's Swiss Army Knife." Whatever tools and processes are selected, the most important thing is that they are appropriate to the project, and agreed-upon. Any time spent brainstorming on ways to make the process leaner is time well spent.

Summary

After years of observing projects, these five areas---Goals, Roles, Relationships, Requirements, Estimates, Availability, and Tools---stand out as things we simply need to get right. Projects that get these seven elements right are nearly always successful.

Did I say successful? What I meant to say was…They're Grrreat!