

WHITE PAPER

The Five Secrets to Project Success

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Applying the Secrets

By putting the following secrets into practice with your own projects, you will hopefully avoid some of the most common pitfalls of project management.

The Five Secrets to Project Success

by Wayne Brantley, MS Ed, PMP, Sr. Director of Villanova University Professional Education Online

Project management (PM) is not a new technology or philosophy. PM is as old as the pyramids. The pharaohs built the magnificent pyramids using some outstanding processes (I imagine that they were at least level 3 in project management maturity methodology). Any effort of work that requires the planning and coordination of resources is a project, and every project is managed using some form of project management.

Because PM has been around for so many years, it boggles my mind that we still approach it like it is a new fad or invention. What has occurred over the last 10-20 years is the maturity of the processes in PM lifecycles. Thanks in a large part to the Project Management Institute (PMI®), we have a standardized body of knowledge. This body of knowledge identifies industry-accepted standards for PM.

Although PMI® has an established body of knowledge, you can argue that there are many ways to skin a cat. I have seen many parallels and similarities to the methodology we see from the PMI®. At the end of the day they are all saying the same thing, albeit in different ways.

The secrets to project success that I am about to share with you did not come from a climb up a Tibetan mountain. They came from one of the finest schools known to humans – the school of hard knocks! This paper is in tribute to all the pain, agony and turmoil that I have seen many a project manager experience. By putting the following secrets into practice with your own projects, you will be able to avoid some of the most common pitfalls of project management.

Your First Step to Project Success

You must know what is happening in each part of the plan. The plan is your compass and your key to project success.

1. Project Planning

Secret number one is project planning. Time and time again I have seen projects poorly planned. I have been surveying project managers for years and they overwhelmingly agree that their companies do not give due diligence to this process.

Let's discuss what occurs during planning, the process that occurs after initiation. Better yet, let's start in initiation. What often breeds out of the purview of the project manager is a commitment to do something: develop a product, service, or process. While the high-level planning process may have been done, this probably resulted in a false sense of confidence that there is a plan or approach to execute the project, with just a few "minor details" to be worked out. That's it. Those few minor details should only need a few hours to plan out. All the "heavy lifting" has been done in initiation. I just love the bright eyes and bushy tails of those naïve individuals (okay, executives) who think this to be true.

Back to planning: What does occur? A whole bunch! There are 21 processes identified in the PM Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®, or the bible from PMI®). The following are the 21 process identified in the PMBOK®:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 3.2.2.1 Develop project management plan | 3.2.2.11 Cost budgeting |
| 3.2.2.2 Scope planning | 3.2.2.12 Quality planning |
| 3.2.2.3 Scope definition | 3.2.2.13 HR planning |
| 3.2.2.4 Create WBS | 3.2.2.14 Communications planning |
| 3.2.2.5 Activity definition | 3.2.2.15 Risk management planning |
| 3.2.2.6 Activity sequencing | 3.2.2.16 Risk identification |
| 3.2.2.7 Activity resource estimating | 3.2.2.17 Qualitative risk analysis |
| 3.2.2.8 Activity duration estimating | 3.2.2.18 Quantitative risk analysis |
| 3.2.2.9 Schedule development | 3.2.2.19 Risk response planning |
| 3.2.2.10 Cost estimating | 3.2.2.20 Plan purchases and acquisitions |
| | 3.2.2.21 Plan contracting |

See, it's simple: Only a couple of hours and you should have all of this done and placed in a nice, handy-dandy project management plan. You may think this seems daunting and overly detailed, but a project manager gets paid to manage the plan – the PM plan. These are all parts of this PM plan. You must know what is happening in each part of the plan. The plan is your compass and your key to project success. So, like a popular sneaker ad says – "Just do it!"

2. Identifying Detailed Requirements – Development of a Detailed WBS (Work Breakdown Structure)

There is a famous saying a wise man once said: "garbage in = garbage out". My second secret that I have to share with you is that you have to get better requirements. I know realistically, as the project manager, you have to deal with

Developing Detailed Requirements

A growing discipline used to complement the PM role is the business analyst (BA). BAs are necessary to help develop requirements that meet the goals of the project and the company.

Risky Business

We know that things will go wrong on our projects, yet too often we manage to the fact that we can handle these issues as they occur.

what is dealt to you. Sometimes, the requirements were already prepared for you to execute a project. I typically find that these are incomplete, if not incoherent. A growing discipline used to complement the PM role is the business analyst (BA). BAs are necessary to help develop requirements that meet the goals of the project and the company.

The fact is this: If you don't take the time out to plan well, you will not develop good requirements. If you do not have good requirements, there will be scope creep. I define scope creep as the exponential expansion of project features and functionality.

Scope creep – “Adding features and functionality without addressing the effects on time, cost, and resources or without customer approval.” —PMBOK® Guide Third Edition

Without detailed requirements there will be extra work, extra resources used, and extra frustrations. In addition, this will result in increased cost and time expended on the project. The effort that must be spent upfront in the planning stage is what's needed to identify and develop good requirements. Here are some steps that I can recommend to enhance the requirements-gathering process:

- Start out with the right people gathering the requirements
- Improve the continuity between project initiation and planning
- Draw a picture if possible
- Continue through until a detailed work breakdown structure (WBS) is developed
- Have all stakeholders sign off

Requirements tell you what it is you are developing. If the project plan is your compass, requirements are your true north. Make the effort to master the skills to develop the requirements that will allow you to develop a valid schedule and budget.

3. Exhaustive Risk Management

I am getting dizzy on this soap box, but I'm up here yet again. What is a risk? It is an uncertain event that can result in a positive (yes, positive) or negative outcome. It never ceases to amaze me: We know that things will go wrong on our projects, yet too often we manage to the fact that we can handle these issues as they occur. The one member that you can count on being on your team is “Murphy”. And we all know Murphy's Law: What *can* go wrong *will* go wrong.

I have to yet again tie in that poor planning will result in poor risk management. As you read this, ask yourself: “Self, how have you seen risk management

Risk is a Moving Target

These are processes that must be done continuously throughout the lifecycle of the project; doing them just once will result in limited risk identification.

Getting Comfortable Outside the Comfort Zone

Project managers are notorious for having outstanding technical skills. But while their technical skills are highly developed, often their interpersonal skills are not.

performed in organizations?” Often this process is not properly executed. Risk has a set of processes that must be given their due respect. They are as follows:

- Risk Management Planning – identifying how, as an organization, and at the project level, you should perform risk management. Risk management is scalable to the project.
- Risk Identification – an exhaustive exploration of all the possible risks of a project. (At this point none are ruled out or ranked.)
- Qualitative Risk Analysis – probability and impacts are determined to analyze the likelihood that the risk could occur.
- Quantitative Risk Analysis – a more mathematical approach to further analyzing risk probabilities and impacts.
- Risk Response Planning – this is when plans are developed to determine how the risks could be handled.
- Risk Monitoring and Control – the continued observance of risk management processes. Determine if contingency plans were effective and if the risks will reoccur.

These are processes that must be done continuously throughout the lifecycle of the project; doing them just once will result in limited risk identification. As you build your project plan, do some risk management. Continue updating your risk management plan throughout the development of your project plan and your project. The processes are not difficult, they are just time consuming.

4. Development of the Project Team – Leadership Skills

Think about the evolution it took to become a project manager. You got a job. You got good at the job. You became really good at what you do, and you became the “project manager”. Why? I know you’re highly educated through the university of hard knocks. But what has occurred is that you got good at what you love to do, and now you can’t do it any more.

We as human beings like to do what we are good at. We feel self esteem in this space. We also feel comfortable in this space. People tend to resist change. Why? Because it takes us out of our comfort zone. Project managers are notorious for having outstanding technical skills. But while their technical skills are highly developed, often their interpersonal skills are not. This is often the reason for many a project failure – and you thought it was all because of a bad Gantt chart.

How do you change this? Start with a project manager development plan. Plan a career path for project managers. Develop them; don’t just appoint them. The army used to have a good system in which you could stay technical or move into administrative/management type roles and receive the same pay and promotions

either way. Not everyone wants to be an administrator or manager. Project managers have a lot to learn – just look at the PMI® Body of Knowledge.

Of all the skills that project managers need to learn, leadership skills may be the most difficult. Why is this? One reason is that the object of their efforts are the most complex systems that we have ever seen: people. When you factor in all their personalities, backgrounds, education, cultures, and gender, difficulty should be expected. Okay, now it's your turn. What about your organization's personalities, backgrounds, education, cultures, and gender? These add to a very complicated formula that requires a lot of understanding of human motivation theory.

In addition to understanding people as individuals, you must understand group dynamics. How do you take a group of individuals with diverse backgrounds and turn them into a cohesive, high-performing team? Effort, education, and the patience of a saint would be my recommendation. The Tuckman model identifies a team's development as forming, storming, norming, and performing. This is a nice, neat package that identifies what you can expect to experience as your team develops. You need to take the time to develop the skills to facilitate these issues and become a great leader.

5. An Organizational Culture for PM

While this is the fifth of the great secrets to project success, it is not by any means the least important. In fact, we could probably identify this as priority one. I am a firm believer that "it starts at the top". If you have C-level ("chief" or highest-level executive) support for an initiative, you are half way there. Just look at what Six Sigma has done with the support of Jack Welch. GE was able to identify billions of dollars of savings. Jack Welch has stated that "Six Sigma must be a part of the corporate DNA for GE". Now *that* is taking a stand. When you have a C-level officer supporting the initiative, you will get the momentum you need.

I said with C-level support you are half way there. What is the other half? The organization as a whole needs to embrace this philosophy, or shall we say, methodology. If you implement a bunch of bureaucratic processes and introduce new, challenging tools without explanation, you will alienate the organization and create resistance to the concept. Start with communication about why you are implementing the new processes and new tools. Make it user-friendly and a part of your implementation plan. Show them how implementation of this new initiative will make their lives better.

Start with a grass-roots effort by training key personnel. Offer the appropriate amount of training to each segment of the workforce. Begin with awareness training – maybe a four-hour overview of the concept to provide a 50,000-foot view. Then provide a basic level of training to establish a common language and

understanding of processes. For those that will go on for advanced roles, provide advanced skills and tools training. This training and implementation will prepare a workforce with a common goal and a common vision.

By training your workforce and your project managers, you will implement a culture of project management with a body of project leaders.

These five secrets are not secrets by any stretch of the imagination. Many will say they are common sense. Most will agree that these are not the actions that they see being done in their organizations. Do these five simple, common-sense actions and you will realize the power and potential of effective project management in your organization.

About the Author

Wayne R. Brantley, MS Ed, PMP®, is the Senior Director of Villanova University Professional Education Online. He has taught and consulted project management around the world to Fortune 500 companies. He has over 24 years experience from the Air Force as a project manager for AF technology training and curriculum development programs. Wayne has developed numerous AF and corporate training programs, classroom, multimedia, and Internet-based programs. A dynamic presenter and trainer, Wayne has spoken at numerous conferences such as the Project Management Institute (PMI®) and the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) annual conferences. Wayne is a doctoral candidate with Nova Southeastern University specializing in Computer Information Technology. Wayne has been or is currently an adjunct faculty member at Villanova University, George Washington University and the University of Alaska.

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