10 Common Project Management Mistakes

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Project management typically has five stages. Some project managers make mistakes during one or more of those stages, which can sabotage the chance of a successful outcome and have disastrous results for everyone involved. Here are two of the most common mistakes — and ways to avoid them — during each of the five stages. Which ones have you made?

Stage #1: Initiating:

1. **Mistake:** The project manager “assumes” he knows what the project sponsor (the high-level person who wants the project done and will support the project) considers to be an acceptable project outcome.

How to Avoid the Mistake: You must have a detailed conversation with the project sponsor that establishes specific and realistic measurable objectives for the project. This includes the outcome (expected objectives), a defined timeline (when does it start and when is it supposed to end?) and the cost of the project (how much money, labor, and stuff is required and where the resources will come from?)

2. **Mistake:** The project manager fails to identify all the stakeholders (those people who will benefit from or be affected by the project and those people who need to be involved in the project at some time during the project).

How to Avoid the Mistake: Ask the project sponsor to identify the primary and secondary stakeholders. Who will be directly and indirectly affected by the project’s outcome? Which stakeholders’ support will be needed to provide the required resources for the project? Include additional stakeholders as the progression of the project reveals them.

Stage #2- Planning:

1. **Mistake:** The project manager fails to include the team when planning how the outcome is going to be achieved.

How to Avoid the Mistake: It is essential to get the team’s ownership of the project and their commitment to produce agreed-upon results on time and within budget. Let the team help create a written project action plan by involving them in:

- Deciding roles and responsibilities of team members
- Creating a project schedule
- Determining the resources needed (personnel, time, material, other resources, etc.)
- Creating a communication plan for the project (see Planning - Mistake #2)

- Identifying the risks to the completion of the project, and creating a risk response plan if necessary

2. **Mistake:** The project manager fails to keep everyone informed.

How to Avoid the Mistake: You and the team should create a communication plan that addresses how and when the team will communicate with each other, with the sponsor, with each stakeholder, and with each team member who is not actively involved in the project. This is often done with status reports (where the project is now), progress reports (how it got there) and change reports (major changes and how they affect the project).

Stage #3- Executing:

1. **Mistake:** The project manager does not hold enough team meetings.

How to Avoid the Mistake: Start every large project with a kickoff meeting to review the project action plan with the team and generate excitement, and then hold weekly team meetings to discuss progress. Were all activities completed on time and within budget? Did the team exceed, miss or meet targets for the week? Use this time to discuss and reconcile problems, conflicts, disputes and potential issues.

2. **Mistake:** The project manager does not celebrate success with the team.

How to Avoid the Mistake: Celebration provides momentum for the team, so don’t wait until you achieve the “overall” success identified in the project action plan. Celebrate small milestones, perhaps on a weekly basis, by recognizing team and individual achievements.

Stage #4- Monitoring:

1. **Mistake:** The project manager is not constantly looking for trouble.

How to Avoid the Mistake: This fix is easy: constantly look for trouble! This means being aware of and managing any issue that might affect the outcome, time frame, or cost of the project. Examples include time slippage (keeping the project on schedule by tracking project activities), scope creep (prohibiting others from enlarging the project by saying “no”) and project changes (knowing how every change may impact — or jeopardize — the project’s success).

2. **Mistake:** The project manager loses track of the project’s outcome, time frame and cost by not using an appropriate tracking system.

How to Avoid the Mistake: Use tracking systems (i.e.,Microsoft Project, QuickBooks, Excel) that will reveal any issues or problems so timely corrective action can be taken.

Stage #5- Completing:

1. **Mistake:** The project manager attempts to complete or “hand off” the project without tying up all the loose ends.

How to Avoid the Mistake: When 90 percent of the project has been completed, meet with the sponsor and primary stakeholders and develop a closing checklist and punch list to identify any remaining uncompleted tasks. Those items **must be done** before handing the project off or declaring the project completed.

2. **Mistake:** The project manager fails to debrief and, if warranted, celebrate with the team.

How to Avoid the Mistake: Upon completion, a critical step is to hold a debriefing session about the project with the team using an after action review to share lessons learned, mistakes made and overcome, and successes achieved. You and the team can discuss what went right and what went wrong, and evaluate individual and team performance. If the project’s objectives were met, celebrate and recognize the individual and team efforts and accomplishments.

While project management is replete with the opportunity to make mistakes, avoid the common ones during each phase, and virtually all of your projects will end in success.

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