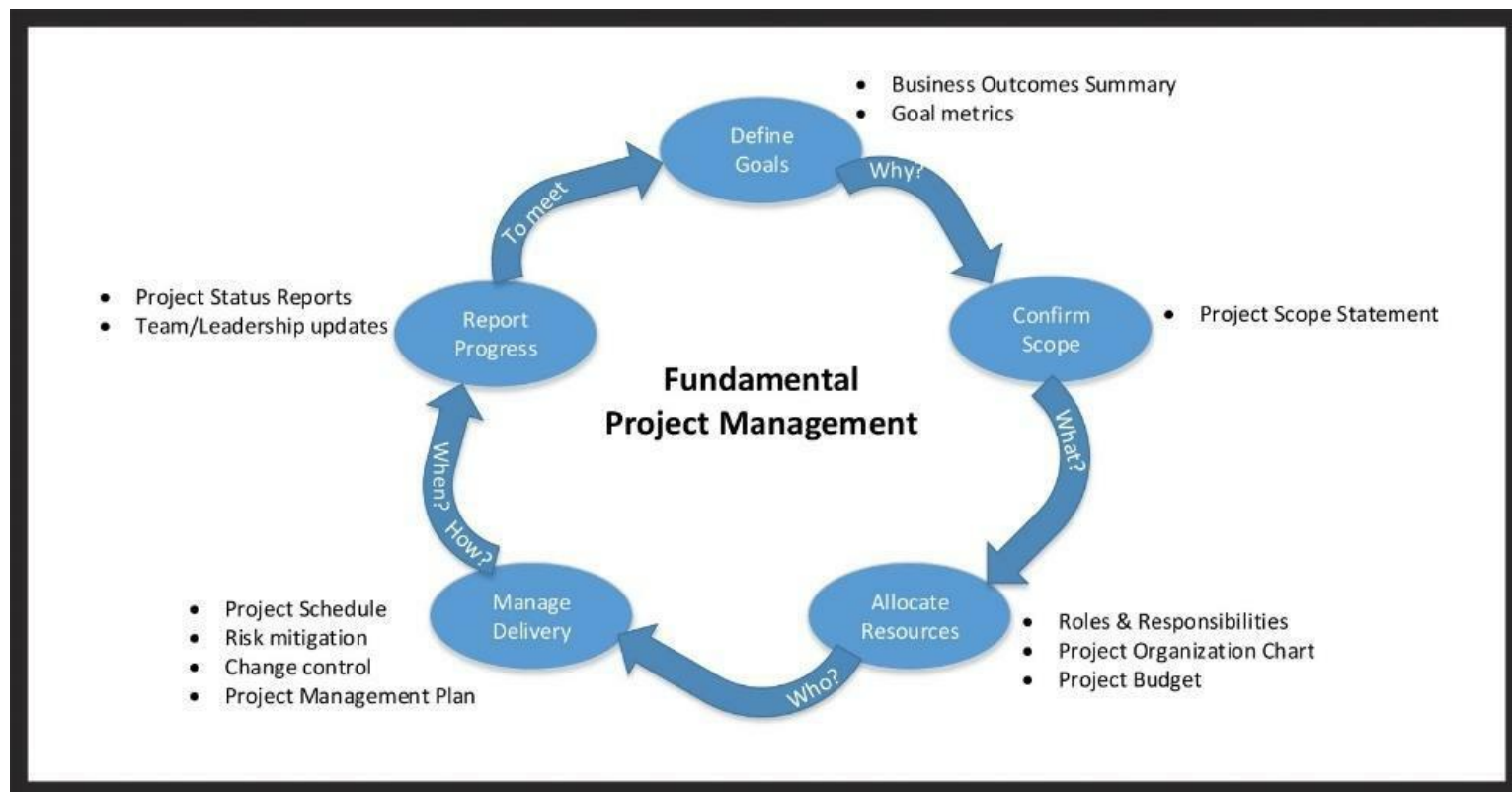# Healthcare Project Management Fundamentals: Have You Mastered The Basics?

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In my 25 years of leading and overseeing projects in the healthcare industry, I've developed an understanding of what makes a project successful. It starts with a bit of luck — luck in having a committed sponsor, a dedicated team, and a realistic budget and schedule, and realistic project priorities. It requires the ability to lead, motivate, influence, and direct that team to deliver results. Most importantly, it requires an understanding of the project management basics, or fundamentals, and the ability to execute these fundamentals consistently well. When you ignore the basics, projects can quickly fall apart.

What Are The Six Fundamentals?

Whether you're a healthcare organization or any other kind of business, project management basics are frequently

defined by the why, what, when, who, where, and how. In other words, what is the goal, description, deadline, role(s), location, and approach of your project? By answering these six questions during project planning and revisiting them throughout the life of your project, you can greatly increase the odds of success upon completion.

1) Project Goal —Why are we doing this project?

In my experience, nearly 90% of projects launch and complete without having a clear understanding of why the project is important to the organization. It's virtually impossible to define the goals of a project — and keep your team members on track — when you have no idea how to measure success or what it will look like.

A few years ago, I was called in by the CEO of a major health plan to address their failing system migration. They were just a few weeks away from their planned "go-live date," and were panic-stricken because the project was significantly behind schedule. It was quickly apparent that there was no clear consensus on the project goals and expectations for success. Everyone was marching to a different set of goals. I developed an immediate action plan to get the project back on track, starting with clarification of expected project goals and outcomes. I helped them address the "why" of their project. Here are a few ways to do this:

- **Create a Business Outcomes Summary** that defines the measurable project outcomes and rationale for expending valuable resources of time, talent, and money. The summary should be approved by project stakeholders, posted in the project room, and constantly referenced as the project scope is defined, refined, and managed throughout the life of the project. This summary can be created using a program like Excel.

- **Review goals and expected outcomes with your team**. Every team member should understand why the project is important and what success will look like.

- **Review the summary throughout the life of the project** to make sure everything you do is in line with your goals. This is especially important when making a "go live" decision.

2) Project Description — What is the project?

Perhaps one of the most challenging areas of project management is the ability to clearly define and manage project scope. At the highest level, this is understanding what you are creating, building, or developing. Is the project to implement a new hospital system? Build out a new facility? Produce a new interface for a care management system? While you may have a clear project objective, you may also have no sense of how detailed a project this will be. And without a clear project description or an understanding of all the moving parts, how can you resource or schedule the project?

Project failings often trace back to poor scope management, which leads to cost overruns, late delivery, and poor

results that don't meet your intended outcomes. To properly outline and define the scope of your project:

- Create a **Project Scope Statement** to document the project scope, including both in-scope and out-scope items. This may be done using a program like Excel to keep track of the elements of your project (i.e. project deliverables).

- Ensure you have a clear project sponsor to confirm and approve project scope and issue final approval on more detailed requirements.

- Baseline the project scope once the requirements are defined and agreed upon, so you know when to invoke change control.

- Ensure your scope/requirements support the realization of outcomes, by vetting them against the Business Outcomes Summary. If they don't, they should be excluded.

- Adopt and rigorously employ a clear change-control process to manage scope and control scope creep.

3) Project Deadline — When does the project need to be completed?

Every project has a timeline and due date for completion. To maximize success, you should clearly define how much time it will take to complete the project and communicate this to your team. It is important that the whole team understands the stakeholder's expectations and rationale for the project completion date.

Once you've defined the deadline, assess the risk of the schedule against the scope defined for the project. Proactive risk planning is critical to meeting a project schedule. In order to keep your project on schedule or anticipate the need for adjustments to your schedule:

- Understand the rationale for the project deadline(s) and whether you will have any latitude for moving the date. That way, if a project falls behind, you'll know whether you can change the schedule or if you may need to compromise quality or cost.

- Create a **Project Schedule** and keep it concise and simple to get the job done. Starting a project without a schedule is like driving with no destination in mind – you may be making great progress, but you have no clue when you'll arrive at your destination. I've seen countless situations where a project schedule is developed at the beginning of the project, only to be put aside and never used again.

- Assess the risk of the schedule against the project scope.

- Adopt the right tool for you to monitor and maintain your Project Schedule and keep it current through the

life of the project. You may use a program like Microsoft Project or Excel. Don't get hung up on the tool to be used – pick one that works for you so that updating and maintaining the schedule is not so onerous that you begin to ignore this important, basic task.

- Frequently review progress against the schedule with the team and stakeholders.

4) Project Roles — Who are the resources for the project (people/capital)?

This is where the rubber meets the road. Without the necessary resources, the project will never meet its intended outcomes. Both the project scope and schedule will dictate the resources you require to complete the project successfully. However, resource limitations can sometimes dictate the project scope or schedule.

In either case, the Project Manager must define the resources required to complete the project work (scope) in the allotted time (schedule) and communicate roles and responsibilities effectively to team members. When I managed a consulting team of program and project managers, I learned that a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities was often the cause of work not getting done or falling through the cracks – everyone thought someone else was doing the work! To manage your resources more effectively and make sure your team is on the same page:

- Document **Roles and Responsibilities** for all resources engaged in the project: team members, sponsors, and stakeholders. When roles and responsibilities are ambiguous, it becomes unclear who will be held accountable for specific tasks. A **Roles & Responsibilities Matrix** can suffice, although it is even better if a RACI Matrix is developed and reviewed with the team.

- Create and distribute a **Project Organization Chart** to ensure clarity of project leadership and an understanding of the escalation path.

- Create and maintain a **Project Budget** to fund both the resources and equipment necessary to deliver the project. Define the budget at the resource level so the cost of each item is clear, be it a person's time or equipment. Track resource time against the budget to avoid significant budget overruns. Establishing a baseline budget and then tracking expenditures against the budget is critical to managing project budget forecasts and effectively managing the overall budget.

5) Project Location — Where is the project taking place?

Don't overlook location when considering the project management basics of your project. The logistics of where the work will be completed is important and can have a direct impact on resource management. The potential impacts of location on cost and scheduling should be considered in advance.

- Agree on **Project Logistics** with the project sponsors and stakeholders. Ensure they understand and agree to the approach being taken, given the potential impact on schedule, cost, and resource assignments. Will the project team be expected to do portions of the project work in a single location? Will they co-locate throughout the life of the project or will they perform most of the work in various locations with only sporadic face-to-face meetings? Projects that involve large teams spread across a large geography may require multiple levels of project management reporting up to a single project manager. Additionally, they may require extra funds to cover the costs and time associated with travel.

- Document and share Project Logistics with team members to ensure expectations are managed.

- Update project schedule as necessary to reflect any impacts due to project logistics.

6) Project Approach — How will the project be completed?

Once you've agreed on the rationale, scope, timing, location, and resources needed for your project, the last basic question to address is how you're going to get the whole thing done. It's critically important that the project team and stakeholders understand how the project will be tracked and managed, as well as how project progress and issues will be communicated.

A standard tool for this purpose is the **Project Management Plan**. It serves as a high-level approach document for the project and clarifies for the project sponsor, stakeholders, and team members how the project will be managed by the Project Manager. The Project Management Plan should be as straightforward, efficient, and cost-effective as possible, and it should:

- Outline specifically how the project manager will communicate with team members, report progress, manage the work, control quality, and track and manage issues and risks.

- Specify the procedures, templates, and tools that will be used to manage the project.

- Clarify what expectations the project manager has for team members. These should be clearly presented during the Project Kick-off meeting.

- Secure approval and buy-in from the project sponsor. The plan should ensure expectations align with the project's business outcomes and framework.

Image Courtesy of Cathy Savinsky

Achieving Successful Outcomes

Many projects rely on effective leadership, communication, problem-solving, and proactiveness to complete projects, all of which are important components. But if the project management basics aren't effectively employed, projects managed by talented teams can still fall short. Moreover, if the project schedule, scope, and budget are not aligned with a clearly defined set of business outcomes, the project could be delivered on time but still deemed a failure.

By sticking to the six project management basics and clearly communicating measurable business outcomes with sponsors in the beginning, you can avoid project failure and achieve greater success in business or healthcare project management.

Cathy Savinsky has over 25 years of senior management and program/project leadership experience. Cathy's expertise lies in leading [healthcare consulting](#) teams, project management office design and leadership, program and project management, quality assurance of system implementations, training development, project recovery, and applications design and development. Cathy holds a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science and Mathematics from UC-Davis and a Master's in Business Administration from UC-Irvine.