

Improve Large-Scale Project Success Odds with These Five Steps



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Just as a general contractor would never start building a home without having specific, written plans in-hand, so too should a large-scale business project never begin without well-thought and properly vetted plans. In both instances, proper planning not only leads to superior execution and outcomes, it also greatly mitigates risks, including unnecessary delays and added costs.

The above would seem so self-evident it scarcely bears mentioning...until you consider the abysmal failure rate of most major business projects. According to the most recent [Standish Group report](#), based on a study of 50,000 projects, just 16.2% met all three primary criteria for success: on-time, on budget and generating expected results. The rest of the projects studied would be considered partial or outright failures. Unsurprisingly, the failure rate is highest for large projects.

How did project planning get to this chaotic state, and what can be done about it? A good way to improve the odds of large-scale project success is by adhering to the following five foundational planning steps.

Step 1: Get Leadership Sponsorship and Ongoing Support

Studies show the single most important project success factor is senior leadership sponsorship and support. To avoid a project faltering or failing, senior leaders must engage their organizations around the project's rationale

and desired results. This should be done at the outset and throughout execution.

Think of this as the “eye on the prize” step. Every organization is barraged with competing requests and interests. By having senior leaders communicate repeatedly that a particular project remains the primary focus, this project won’t somehow get short-changed due to other demands.

Ensure that senior leaders own and are accountable for this initiative. Note the specific opportunities for leaders to lean in and lend their voice toward your effort. Early engagement allows senior leaders to add their imprint and take pride in their project success contributions.

Step 2: Align the Project with Recognition/Compensation

It’s insufficient for leaders to simply state that a project requires everyone’s attention. There needs to be teeth in the request, in the form of tying project success steps to recognition and compensation. Nothing gets employee attention like hinging their reputation and income on project finalization.

Ensure that your project factors into performance evaluations and incentive and compensation decisions for all levels, including senior leaders. Establish that leaders will be assessed based on their performance relative to the initiative. Communicate these standards to team members and discuss the alignment of goals and incentives.

Then, measure results and hold leaders and employees accountable for performance. Provide clear and consistent ongoing feedback, so that there are no recognition or compensation surprises down the road.

Step 3: Ensure Proper Project Scope and Flexibility

Like the general contractor’s blueprint, a written project plan should reflect all of the background information, plans, and analyses necessary for a project to succeed. The most successful large-scale projects start with appropriate due diligence and planning, and subsequently have in place change control processes giving decision-makers timely, accurate, and fact-based data to make good decisions.

Problems crop up on large projects when the plan lacks key information, has been unduly influenced by people unfamiliar with the project, or lacks support from key stakeholders. Given the inherent complexity of most large projects, it’s likely that a plan will at some point lack crucial data, like a formal feasibility study or cost-benefit analysis. What matters most is what’s done to address this missing data.

To ensure a project stays in-scope, those who developed and approved the plan also need to be responsible for executing it. All project plan details should be captured in writing, especially scope and schedule changes. Weekly project team meetings should be used to address inevitable project issues.

Step 4: Plan Communication Strategy Up-Front

Projects typically falter and fail amid dysfunctional communication. Given that most large-scale projects involve

contributions from disparate departments, including personnel who've not worked together before, it's important that communication be planned from the outset. This includes establishing a project team identity and focus, developing and disseminating multiple types of communication via various mediums, and having procedures for decision-making and conflict resolution.

At a minimum, the project team should meet and communicate face to face, in person or virtually, once a week. This is an opportunity for attendees to determine if tasks are behind schedule, require additional resources, or identify risks and issues and brainstorm potential solutions. After these meetings, the project manager should communicate progress to the organization's leadership as well as other relevant project personnel like stakeholders, partners and suppliers.

Larger organizations often have someone assigned to handle project communications. If your organization has such resources, leverage them at the outset. Large projects rely on frequent, clear and consistent communication for success.

Step 5: Manage the Project Schedule Well

It's imperative to have excellent schedule management on a large-scale project. Given that there will be inevitable project problems that must be addressed, including friction among team members, and the unexpected departure of key personnel, project scheduling needs to be flexible enough to make required course corrections.

Create an intelligent schedule and work plan and ensure sufficient resources are assigned to each task, using a management tool or process to identify resources stretched too thin. Assign a start and completion date to every project task. When issues impact the schedule, address them immediately by asking, "What can we do to quickly resolve this?" Escalate potential gaps to leadership early to provide ample time to identify solutions.

Stick with the Success Steps

While these large-scale project success steps may not cover the entire gamut of project problems which may arise, they should address 80 to 90 percent of the issues most likely to derail a project. Avoid the temptation to go "off-script" and not adhere to these success steps. Organizations which follow these steps are more likely to complete their projects on-time, on-budget and to everyone's satisfaction.