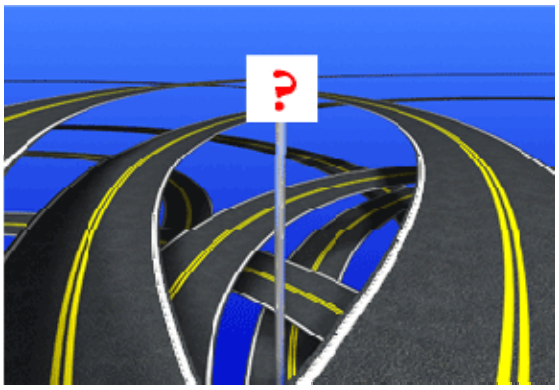
CORNELIUS & ASSOCIATES

Seven Tactics to Increase Project Success

Edwin T. Cornelius III, Ph.D.

Whether you are about to undertake a six-week project or a three-year, multi-million dollar implementation, you will be faced with common issues, such as having your project run behind schedule, over budget, disorganized, suffering from poor leadership, or not as successful as hoped. From our experience, we have learned seven tactics to help institutions avoid these pitfalls.

Tactic 1: Carry Out a Project "Readiness Assessment"



"When you don't know where you want your project to go, any road will take you there —whether you wanted your project to go there or not."

Louis J. Sarasohn and Michael S. Luehlfing, "Project Management on the Fly – the Road to

This first tactic is best suited for institutions about to engage in a large project, in which there are big budgets and commitments that will tie-up institutional resources for a long period. With large projects, institutions should carry out a "readiness assessment" prior to beginning the project to evaluate the project plan and ensure it is realistic and will be effective. This action is not practiced as often as it should.

A "readiness assessment" is, in fact, a risk mitigation tool, and can be invaluable in the planning of a multi-year, multi-million dollar project. The primary purposes for conducting a "readiness assessment" are:

1. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the institution to carry out the project
2. Use this information to plan and manage the project better, including development of a project scope document, timeline, budget, communication plan, and training plan
3. Use this information as a starting point for a project risk analysis with preventative and contingent actions identified

An Example

To illustrate this approach, we will use an example of a multi-year, enterprise-wide software implementation project at a state university. The "readiness assessment" consisted of structured interviews with 68 individuals over a four-week period. Interviewees included a sample of the end-users of the new system, information technology personnel, university administrators, consultants from the software vendor, and contacts from other universities who had experience implementing the same software package.

The results of these interviews produced data that proved invaluable in developing a better plan for

the project, a more realistic budget, and a different type of project organization than the one they were thinking about, plus other benefits. One of the major eye-opening results was a simple list of the top ten concerns expressed by the major stakeholders. This list was well received and was used to make changes in the proposed project organization, the communication plan, and the leadership composition of project sub-teams.

One of the most important results of this "readiness assessment" involved the budget assessment. Because of this process, the budget was increased from $4.7 million to a more realistic $10.8 million. Educating the institution and alerting its leaders to a better cost estimate prior to beginning the project was less painful for the project team than if this discovery were made in the middle of the project. Other important results included identifying critical interfaces ahead of time, developing a consensus for full-time project dedication of key people, constructing key elements of a communication plan and a training plan, and making appropriate changes in the project timeline. In short, this analysis better prepared the university to carry out this project.

Tactic 2: Develop Logic-Based Plans, not Date-Driven Plans

We are continually surprised that many project plans are still date-driven, and not logic-driven or dependency-driven. Date-driven plans are often misleading and do not allow for flexibility and troubleshooting. Institutions are missing an opportunity to make the most of the powerful project management software that is available, in which task durations and dependency relationships among tasks may be entered and stored digitally.

With logic-based plans and with the help of today's software, we can now immediately see the impact of missed task deadlines on the likelihood of achieving milestones that are still months away. Therefore, the consequences of falling behind early in the schedule of a project are now instantly known for the life of the project. Another benefit of using logic-driven plans is the information about delays comes early enough for project compression interventions to have an effect. Widespread use of this tool alone will greatly increase the likelihood of project success.

Tactic 3: Get Ownership of the Project Plans

Through the years, we have learned the importance of ensuring all individual members of the project team support the project plans and project schedule. When there is group "ownership," project team members are more likely to treat the plan and milestones seriously and put forth the necessary effort to get the work done.

The most effective way to achieve this ownership is to use the entire project team when putting together the plan. The project team members should identify the tasks and should produce the work breakdown structure. If the entire team estimates task duration and rates the dependency relationships among the tasks, then there is more understanding and ownership in the resulting schedule. This is based on the simple theory that if a person helps create something, they feel ownership. In cases where someone else dictates the plan to the project team, as milestone dates approach, there is often a tendency for team members to portray the schedule as unrealistic, rather than work hard to make a deadline that they themselves "own."

Tactic 4: Insist on Specific Project Objectives

"In reality the majority of projects fail due to the lack of clear objectives and lack of appropriate scope management."

Jody Bullen, "Making Project Management Work: A Critical Assessment of the Key Elements of Successful Project Management"

Project management surveys continue to cite poorly stated project objectives as a cause in poor project execution. With poorly stated objectives, it is sometimes difficult to determine when the project is over, whether it was a success or not, or even a clear strategy for accomplishing project objectives in the first place. In too many objective statements, cost, quality, and time parameters are not addressed or are inadequately stated.

As a simple illustration, let us look at a smaller project's objectives. Listed below are three different expressions of objectives for a computing help desk project:

1. Improve our responsiveness to help tickets
2. Reduce the time it takes to respond to help tickets
3. Reduce the time it takes to respond to help tickets by a factor of fifty percent no later than May 1, 2007 within a budget of $5,000

For many projects, the expression of project objectives is similar to statements one and two above. Objective two is a much better formulation than objective one; however, objective three is superior and should be the ultimate goal. Notice how increasing levels of specificity in the goal statement reduces the ambiguity about what is to be accomplished, by when, to what level of quality, and with what resources. When we follow the discipline of expressing project objectives in specific terms, there is no ambiguity about the three major drivers of most projects: time, cost, and quality. It is also a simple matter to decide if the project was a success or not.

Improving project objective statements is not overly complex, particularly on projects of smaller scope. Many times, it takes merely the discipline and the time to precisely state project objectives in specific terms with measurable results.

Tactic 5: Address the "Soft Issues" of Teamwork and Leadership

In project management, there is a trend to be focused on the technical issues of the project, the timeline, the project plan, the resources, budget, etc. When in fact, if a project is going to fail, in most cases a good deal of the problem can be traced back to leadership, lack of teamwork among departments in an institution, and other "soft" or cultural issues.

We recommend that teamwork and leadership become important aspects to consider and improve when trying to advance the success of your projects. In fact, in our "readiness assessment" (discussed earlier), leadership, teamwork, and team processes receive considerable weight in determining an organization's ability to carry out a project successfully.

In terms of team processes, expertise in the following areas will help improve the likelihood of project success: effective team meeting skills, a structured group problem solving process, use of standard problem solving tools, good group decision-making skills, and conflict resolution skills. In terms of leadership, we believe that the project manager and sub-team leaders of large projects need a completely new set of leadership skills, including team facilitation skills, human relations skills, influencing skills, negotiation skills, as well as visionary leadership skills.

For large projects, we recommend you establish a formal development program to incorporate these group process skills and leadership skills. A program of this nature will not only help the project run better, but also will help improve the talent of the organization as a whole.

Tactic 6: Get Better at Communication

> "Properly communicating on a project is a critical success factor for managing expectations of the customer and the stakeholders."
>
> *The Ten Step Project Management Process, "6.0 Manage Communication"*

Repeatedly in post-project assessments, project teams list communication as an area in need of improvement. Many times, team members express that if the communication had been better, the project would have run smoother. Further, John Katter, in his book, *Leading Change*, estimates that management under-communicates by a factor of ten or more on most change projects.

To improve project communication, we recommend constructing a Communication Table for the project. Using this device, major stakeholders are identified.

For each stakeholder, we develop information on the following items:

- A list of the types of communications stakeholders must receive (what are we doing, why are we doing it, what our role is, status reports, updates on project progress, project timeline, team minutes, etc.)
- Who is responsible for the communication
- What communication methods we will use (email, web site, group meetings, one-on-one meetings, etc.)
- When will the communication occur
- How frequently will we communicate the message

For more detail on creating a Project Communication Table, see our "Project Communication Table" Tool. The concept of a Communication Table is simple and it is easy to construct. However, mostly it is a handy tool to help project team members understand their communication obligations while providing a plan to help team members actually carry out the needed communication.

Tactic 7: Follow a Specific Project Management Process

Our final suggestion is to faithfully follow a project management process. There are varied estimates of the impact of a standard process; however, most observers agree that the use of any project management process can improve project performance by five to fifteen percent.

A project management process is a roadmap of the steps in executing a professionally managed project. An example of the major steps of a specific project management process is as follows:

1. Select the project
2. Initialize the project
3. Develop critical issues and project organization structure
4. Develop a top tier, logic-driven, work breakdown structure
5. Complete project risk analysis
6. Develop detailed plans
7. Finalize project economics
8. Develop communications plan
9. Reach organizational consensus on scope, plan, and economics
10. Implement, track and control
11. Close the project
12. Conduct post-project assessment

There is a consensus among professional project managers that a standardized approach to defining and executing projects is inextricably intertwined with project success.

We urge you to make use of these seven tactics to improve the execution of projects in your institution. These techniques, when implemented, will make managing projects easier, more successful, and more effective.