Chapter 4: The challenges for project managers

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Chapter 4: The challenges for project managers

SYNOPSIS

This chapter investigates the challenges the project manager faces. Some remedies to the challenges are briefly discussed. The temporary nature of the projects is a core challenge for project managers. The challenges faced by project managers (Meredith & Mantel 2003:28) form the basis of this chapter and twelve rules in this regard are discussed.
Chapter 4: The challenges for project managers

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Most organisations are under pressure to improve their performance in order to achieve sustainable business success under tight budgets and within short periods of time in today’s global marketplace. These change initiatives result in the introduction of new projects that pose challenges to those responsible for the implementation of project management. The temporary nature of projects, combined with the very limitations on power and discretion most project managers face, constitutes the core challenge of managing projects effectively (Meredith & Mantel 2003:28).

Heerkens (2002:32-36) suggests the following common challenges for project managers to expect during the implementation of their projects:

- **The responsibility vs. authority trap:** Firmly embedded in project management folklore is that the responsibility given to project managers is not commensurate with the authority they believe they need to accomplish the mission. In a purely functional organisation the gap between responsibility and authority will be quite wide.

- **Imposition of unrealistic targets:** Unfortunately, real world targets are too often based on desire or a vague sense of what should be achieved, rather than driven by calculated business needs. In even more unfortunate circumstances, targets are developed before it is even known what the project entails. This practice puts project managers in a very difficult position, as it often sets them up for certain failure and severely undermines the planning process.
In the face of project management challenges, one of the more difficult tasks for project managers is managing team members who have an inherent tendency to think and act in terms of optimising their own discipline, technical field or department. This situation may be complicated by the dual responsibility trap, where project managers are required to perform their job duties while also acting as project managers. This dual responsibility may present additional challenges for project managers.

Meredith & Mantel (2003:28) identify twelve rules that project managers need to keep in mind when undertaking a project implementation effort (See Figure 4-1).

1. **Understand** the context of project management.
2. **Recognise** project team conflict as progress.
3. **Understand** who the stakeholders are and what they want.
4. **Accept** the political nature of organisations and use it to your advantage.
5. **Lead** from the front: the view is better.
6. **Understand** what "success" means.
7. **Build** and maintain a cohesive team.
8. **Enthusiasm** and despair are both infectious.
9. **One look** forward is worth two looks back.
10. **Remember** what you are trying to do.
11. **Use time** carefully or it will use you.
12. **Above all**, plan, plan, plan

*Source: Meredith & Mantel 2003:28*
4.2 TWELVE RULES FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

These twelve rules will be discussed further in this chapter. While not intended to appear in any particular order, these twelve rules offer a useful way to understand the challenges faced by project managers and some ways to address these concerns.

4.2.1 Understand the context of project management

The introduction of project management techniques by organisations presents some challenges to those who are going to manage the projects. The project managers in particular will be faced with the challenge of understanding the project management process and technique in order to successfully manage these projects.

Turner (1993:70) presents the following responsibilities the project manager needs in order to manage the interface with operations effectively:

- Ensure that all participants understand and are committed to the project’s goal.
- Ensure that the project’s systems and documents are understood by all.
- Create cooperation between project and operations by communicating project plans in a form in which both the project plans and their consequences are understood and accepted.

The project manager is responsible for the success or failure of the project as results the project manager must understand the project management principles in order to successfully complete the projects.
4.2.2 Recognise project team conflict as progress

Conflict will always be present in any project as long as it involves teams with people. Conflict can happen in many ways: cultural differences, different opinions over a certain systems approach, personal differences and so forth. The project manager must be able to deal with whatever conflict he may come across during the project implementation as a result of his team members.

Although a certain level of conflict is required to foster the project progress, the project manager must be able to deal with any unwanted conflict by the team members without any panic. According to Wysocki et al. (2000:258) conflicts arise when two or more team members have a difference of opinion, when the customer has an issue with an action to be taken by the project team, or in a variety of other situations involving two parties with different points of view.

According to Klastorin (2004:63), the fact that project management is synonymous with change management, creates stress for both the project manager and the project team. The current tendency for organisations to set tighter budget and schedule goals exacerbates the stress level of both the team members and project managers. He further suggested the seven basic areas that can serve as potential sources of conflict for project teams and managers:

- Scheduling and sequencing
- Administrative procedures
- Manpower issues
- Budget and cost issues
- Personality conflicts
The challenges for project managers

- Project priorities
- Technical opinions and performance trade-offs

Newell & Grashina (2004:138) argue that a long and aggressive conflict atmosphere can strongly inhibit the project team from being productive. Therefore, one of the important skills a project manager has to perform is to be able to track down the sources of conflicts and solve the problems resulting from them.

Newell & Grashina (2004:138) further present the best-known practices of conflict resolution, which involve:

- **Forcing.** One of the sides of the conflict forces his or her opinion on the others.
- **Smoothing.** A third party makes it seem as if the problems are less than they are.
- **Compromising.** All the sides give something up.
- **Problem-solving.** A discussion goes on and the conflicting sides try to get additional information to support their position until one of the sides agrees to understand the position of the other side.
- **Withdrawal.** One of the conflicting sides just “shuts the door” and removes himself from the conflict.

Conflict can be handled in several ways, but project managers who avoid conflict do not make successful project managers. Most conflict in projects arises because the project team members and people have mixed feelings and expectations about plans, role and their responsibilities.
4.2.3. Understand who the stakeholders are and what they want

According to Newell & Grishina (2004:11), a stakeholder is anyone who has anything to gain or lose as a result of this project. It includes all the people who have anything to gain or lose by doing the project or through the results delivered by the project.

The introduction of a project benefits some, while at the same time affecting others negatively. A good example is the upcoming Gautrain project, which will benefit commuters in general, while its railway track will require residents and businesses in the area to relocate. All who are directly or indirectly affected, either internally or externally, are the stakeholders of the project. The project manager must be able to identify and consult with all the stakeholders before the project starts for clarity about the project: what the project will entail and who is going to benefit and lose in the project process.

Andersen et al. (2004:48) suggests several reasons why it is important for a project manager to identify the stakeholders and do stakeholder analysis. These include to:

- Familiarise itself with the stakeholders
- Understand how the coalition of stakeholders can be kept together
- Balance the contributions of the stakeholders and the rewards they will receive from the project
- Establish information distribution
- Establish a basis for goal setting
It is important for project managers to acknowledge the impact of stakeholders and to work to minimise their effects by fostering good relations with them if they want to succeed without their interference.

4.2.4. Accept the political nature of organisations and use it to your advantage

The world is influenced and ruled by politics and project managers and their organisations must be aware of political influence on their project initiatives. Important decisions involving resources are made through bargaining and deal-making. Project managers who wish to succeed must learn to use the political system to their advantage. This involves becoming adept at negotiation, as well as using influencing tactics to further the goals of the project.

According to Dinsmore (1999:86), when managing stakeholders in a project, there are some recommended techniques for successful politicking in favour of a given cause that the project managers should consider:

- Plant seeds of action by casually remarking on issues, circulating articles, or citing third parties.
- Do not press the issues; give people time to absorb and process new ideas and issues.
- Involve others, since politics in nature includes and affects groups of people.
- Give details in support of your cause as discussions evolve.
- Include the suggestions of others and negotiate any details involving the interest of all.
Turner (1993:91) indicates that most projects raise political issues, and hence require political support. People working on a project must be attuned to political issues and must be ready to manage them. To be successful, project managers must manage upwards and outwards, as well as downwards. The project manager should court the politicians and influential managers, helping allies by providing information needed to champion their programme.

Project managers need appropriate political tactics and behaviour to successfully overcome the political influences to their projects on hand.

4.2.5. Lead from the front: the view is better

Strong, effective leaders can go a long way towards helping a project succeed, even in the face of a number of external or unforeseen problems. Conversely, a poor, inflexible leader can often ruin the chances of many important projects ever succeeding. Leaders are the focal point of their projects (Meredith & Mantel 2003:30).

Deeprose (2001:141) argues that managing is controlling, taking charge of, directing, administering. He suggests six guidelines to become an effective leader:

- Keep the purpose, goals and approach relevant and meaningful.
- Build commitment and confidence.
- Strengthen the mix and level of skills.
- Manage relationships with outsiders, including removing obstacles.
• Create opportunities for others.
• Do real work

Leadership is all about influencing people. Good leadership plays an important role in project management. A good leader (project manager) must lead the team to complete the project successfully.

According to Knutson (2001:20), the project manager should have the following leadership qualities to successfully complete the project successfully:

• Develop and sell a vision for the project.
• Cope with operational and strategic change on the project.
• Build reciprocal networks with relevant stakeholders.
• Develop a cultural ambience for the project team that facilitates commitment and motivation.
• Set the general direction of the project through collaboration with project stakeholders.
• Perceive broad issues that are likely to impact on the project, and then work with the team members in accommodating these broad issues.
• Become a symbol of the project and its purposes and do the right things.

The competency to serve as both a project leader and a project manager is dependent on the individual’s knowledge, skills and attitudes. Project managers must show leadership skills, acceptable by their team members, in order to stay focused on the mission of the project.
4.2.6. Understand what "success" means

There is no point for a project manager to complete the project within budget, on time and with the correct performance, but without the satisfaction of the customer. As a result project managers must understand what success means when managing their projects.

According to Knutson (2001:356-357), project success is much more than just doing what you set out to do. It is also about whether what you are doing is in fact the right thing to do. He also suggests that the key success indicators should reflect the following four dimensions:

- **Project efficiency**: satisfaction with the project management process, that is, the deliverables are completed on time and within budget, and meet other efficiency measures as well.

- **Impact on customer**: general acceptance and satisfaction with the project’s deliverable on the part of the project’s customer and the majority of the project’s community at some time in future. This could include meeting specified performance goals, providing improved service; enhance reputation, and timely upgrades to the product.

- **Business and direct success**: key objective of the project, such as the business objectives of the sponsoring organisation, owner or user. In the case of not-for-profit projects, this could include other direct impacts on the performing organisation.

- **Preparing the future**: to what extent the project contributes to future capabilities and later organisational activities and projects.
Without agreement on these criteria at the beginning of the project, it will not be possible to measure its success objectively.

According to Nicholas (2004:543), the best overall criterion for project success, regardless of industry, is the satisfaction of the parties involved. By most accounts, if the client, end-user, project manager and developer all feel that their expectations were met or exceeded; the project must be considered a success.

### 4.2.7. Build and maintain a cohesive team

Many projects are implemented through the use of cross-functional teams. The project manager's job is to do whatever is necessary to build and maintain the cohesion of the team. Orr (2004:91-105) suggests that in order to achieve a successful project, the project manager needs a successful project team. Without a strong team, the expectations of the organisation will not be met because the project will fail. To achieve this, the project manager needs to consider four areas with respect to building the team and motivation:

- **Define the project team:** mapping out who is involved in the project is the first step in building the project team.

- **Motivate the project team:** although it is important to ensure that the project team has the right set of skills to enable it to deliver the project on time, it is often not this that lets it down. Generally it is better to have someone who is
highly motivated with average skills than someone who has brilliant skills but
does not really care.

- *Listen to the team.* Listening to the team after establishing the formal
structures is very important. By doing that the project manager will be able to
discover where the established structure is failing.

- *Gain the respect of the project team.* Gaining the project team’s respect is a
hard job. It can only be achieved through being consistent and delivering
according to any promises that have been made.

Project managers cannot succeed without a strong and effective team members.
Project managers must be able to motivate and coach team members without
coursing any unnecessary conflict. On the other hand the project team must be able
to solve most of their technical and managerial problems of a project without
recourse to outside assistance.

### 4.2.8. Enthusiasm and despair are both infectious

Team members want and deserve to be kept abreast of what is happening around
them as the project progresses. Effective communication is a key success to the
project as it eliminates rumour about the progress of the project. Team members
must be kept abreast with information regarding the project progress. Team
members must know what is happening at all times. It is important to remember that
the success or failure of the project affects the team as well as the project manager.
According to Klastorin (2004:9), good communication is the key to successful project
management and projects fail when there are too many people involved, making
communication difficult.
Meredith & Mantel (2003:32) indicate that when team members come to the project manager for advice or project updates, it is important to be honest. If the project manager does not know the answer to their questions, he should tell them that. Truth in all forms is recognisable, and most project team members are much more appreciative of honesty than of dishonesty.

Communication is a major contributing factor to the project’s outcome. The project manager must effectively communicate with his team to realise its potential.

4.2.9. One look forward is worth two looks back

Once all the estimates for the project have been calculated, it is important to allow for contingencies to those calculated estimates as things can go wrong due to errors in the estimates or even unforeseeable circumstances.

According to Burke (2001:83) the contingency estimates cover should include the following non-recoverable items:

- Under-estimating work content due to lack of scope definition.
- Additional work caused by design error.
- Rework caused by production mistakes.
- Rework and replacements caused by material or component failure.
- Labour and equipment standing idle due to import delays and inclement weather.
- Lost production caused by industrial action, strikes, work to rule or go slow.
• Limited supply of skilled labour locally.

• The size of the contingency will depend on many factors, including the type of project, general efficiency and competency of the organisation, and the degree of risk and uncertainty.

Meredith & Mantel (2003:32) found that the leading determinant of project failure was the absence of any troubleshooting mechanisms. Projecting a sceptical eye towards the future may seem gloomy to some managers, but in the opinion of Meredith & Mantel (2003:32) it makes good sense. One cannot control the future, but one can actively control one’s response to it.

The failure to apply adequate contingency planning may lead to project failure. This may cause the cost of the projects to overrun unnecessarily and further result in penalties.

4.2.10. Remember what you are trying to do

The project managers must focus on their role and responsibilities during the life cycle of the project.

According to Meredith & Mantel (2003:33), whatever technique project managers use, it is important that they understand the importance of keeping the mission in focus for all team members.
4.2.11. **Use time carefully or it will use you**

Time is money and time wasted will never be regained. Many project managers spend too much of their time on unplanned activities, which in turn wastes project time: project team meetings without agendas, unexpected telephone calls in the middle of planning sessions.

According to Turner (1993:206), managing time, by which the project manager coordinates the efforts of those involved, delivers the facility to meet market opportunities, and so ensures that revenues are derived at a time which gives a satisfactory return on investment.

Meredith & Mantel (2003:33) suggests six practical points to help project managers control their tasks and projects without feeling constantly behind schedule:

- Create a realistic time estimate without overextending yourself.
- Be absolutely clear about what the boss or client requires.
- Provide for contingencies (schedule slippage, loss of a key team member).
- Revise the original time estimate and provide a set of options as required.
- Be clear about factors that are fixed (specifications, resources, and so on).
- Learn to say "Yes, and …" rather than "No, but…". Negotiation is the key.

Efficient time management is the key to successful project management and requires proper time scheduling. The project manager is responsible for this. Operating effectively means that the project manager and his team must stick to the plan and time budget for all activities identified in the work breakdown structure.
4.2.12. Above all, plan, plan, and plan

Once approval of the project proposal has been gained, the project manager must assemble a team to work on the planning and design of the project. The project manager and his team must evaluate the techniques to be used in order to achieve the project constraints: project performance, time and within budget. If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail. Figure 4-2 indicates activities that should be included in the planning process.

Klastorin (2004:41) suggests that once an organisation has decided to move forward with a project proposal, the project manager must complete a project plan; the parts of most project plans are given in Table 4-2.

The planning stage must be managed carefully to allow the project manager and team the time necessary to formulate appropriate and workable plans that will form the basis for the development process. Dividing up the tasks and starting the "work" of the project too quickly is often ultimately wasteful. Steps that were poorly done are often steps that must be redone; a complete and full investigation of any proposed project takes significant time and effort (Meredith & Mantel 2003:33).

Planning forms the basis of project success in project management. The effective project manager is responsible for the planning of the project from start to finish.
Table 4-2 Outline of a project plan

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1. Project overview and Organisation</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.1 Summary statement/project charter</td>
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<td>1.1.1 Specific mission statement.</td>
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<td>1.1.2 Define goals and constrain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1.3 Clearly define specifications of final product/service.</td>
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<td>1.1.4 Define project team composition.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2 Work breakdown structure (WBS)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2.1 Define specific tasks or work package.</td>
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<td>1.2.2 Identify responsible persons for each task.</td>
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<td>1.2.3 Specify task durations and dates.</td>
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<td>1.2.4 Assign initial cost estimates to task.</td>
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<td>1.3.1 Specify how project fits into organisational mission.</td>
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<td>1.4.1 Specify types of contract and bidding process.</td>
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<td>2. Project Scheduling</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1 Time and schedule</td>
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<td>2.1.1 Define task precedence relationship.</td>
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<td>2.1.2 Find critical path and task starting and ending time.</td>
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<td>3.1 Cost control metrics</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1.1 Specify timing of periodic cost reports.</td>
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<td>3.1.2 Indicate communication documents.</td>
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<td>3.2 Change orders</td>
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<td>3.2.1 Specify how change orders will be handled.</td>
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<td>3.2.2 Budget and schedule update procedures.</td>
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<td>3.2.3 Milestone reports</td>
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<td>3.2.1 Specify major reviews and responsible persons.</td>
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<td>4. Project Termination</td>
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<td>4.1 Post-project evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.1.1 Specify who will conduct post-project audits.</td>
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<td>4.1.2 Specify metrics for evaluating project success/failure.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Klastorin 2004:42
4.3. CLOSURE

The introduction of project management and projects by organisations pose serious challenges to project managers. This chapter discussed several challenges project managers face in managing projects as a result of introducing new projects. The twelve rules by Meredith & Mantel (2003:28), which offer useful ways to understand the challenges project managers face and some ways to address these challenges, were discussed in this chapter.

The next chapter discusses the consequences of appointing an accidental project manager.