7 Deadly Sins of Project Management

PM7

Introduction

Introduction

We all make mistakes. Project managers are certainly no exception - though as a profession we tend to be placed under much scrutiny at times and therefore those mistakes may become big news and can be - depending on the mistake - quite damaging and costly to the projects we are running.

In the world of project management, there are so many things that need to be done and when they aren't done, they can damage our project engagements. Or things that we do or actions that we actually do take, that can really mess things up, too. Sometimes we dip into our personal past or into our professional past where we witnessed someone else's project go south, to gain this type of insight. Either way, it makes an impression - likely because of the chaos and destruction it caused on our projects.

One way to look at it is consider what project management best practices are .... and then not do them. Or take project management best practices and really screw them up and see what happens.

As you read these pages, think about times when you've been faced with similar challenges and issues. How did you handle them? Have you witnessed other project managers commit these sins? Is your organization committing them now - as a whole - because certain best practices aren't part of your PMO's project management methodology or ongoing culture?

Are you personally committing these on some or all of your projects currently? What other items might you consider to be deadly sins or potential showstoppers on the path to project success?

Let's read on and consider each of these carefully - hopefully learning along the way to avoid these mistakes or stop making them...whichever might happen to be your personal situation.

Taking the Customer at Their Word

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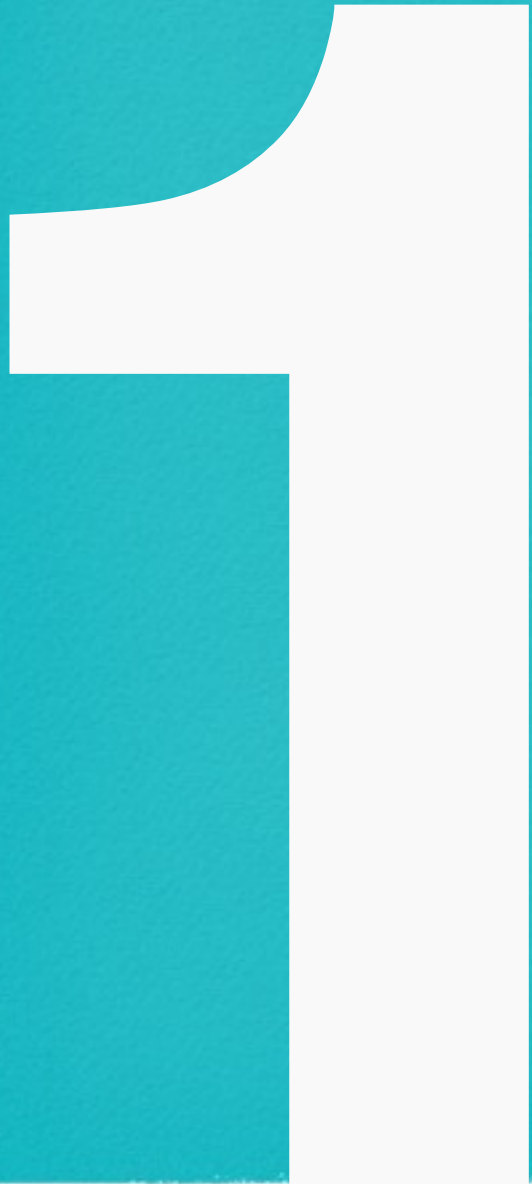
Taking the Customer at Their Word

Like most of us out there, I've learned some hard lessons in life through relying on what normally would be common sense or courtesy, only to find that others don't have the same understanding and they don't always play by the same rules. Buying a house from unscrupulous realtors during the housing boom in Las Vegas was a learning experience, working in the casino/gaming industry was sort of like Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, and customer's are not always fully educated on what they want and need AND they're usually looking out for their own interests first.

I'm not saying customers are bad – not by any means. But you perceive them to be the experts in what they want and need and that is often not the case. All they really truly know for sure is that they have a need – either because they've figured that out for themselves or their end users have told them that through feedback or declining sales, etc. You may also perceive them to be fair, but again, they're looking out for their own financial needs first and that's only fair. But whether you're an independent consultant going in to run an implementation for a customer or you're a project manager from a large organization backed by a PMO ... either way don't think the customer won't leverage things their way whenever they feel they need to.

What I'm saying is, don't take anything with the customer for granted.

Don't assume the customer understands their need

Go into any engagement with the customer with the blinders off. Ask lots of questions, toss their 'requirements' aside or – if they look halfway reasonable – use them...but only as a starting point. Never – under any circumstances – take customer-provided requirements and run with them without questioning

them and drilling down deeper. It's your job as the trained professional to ask the tough questions and get to the real issue. Often, what the customer comes to you with is only a symptom of the real problem.

Let's say a project sponsor comes to you asking for new reports to be created coming out of their timekeeping system because accounting isn't getting the information they need to do their job. If you ask enough questions and talk to the actual end users, you may find that replacing the current timekeeping system with a newer one will give accounting their own interface to get the info they need and allow for future expansion and scalability. Now you've solved today's AND tomorrow's problems.

Don't assume the customer has your back

The customer may be your friend during the engagement and they may be as helpful as you can ever imagine a customer being. However, if things go wrong, they will cover their own needs. They will seek to replace team members on your project team by complaining to your senior management. And they will 'interpret' signoffs to work in their favor as much as possible and withhold payments until they are satisfied. Again, I am not saying project customers are bad. They just have different priorities than we do and they have their own dollars and organizations to protect.

Summary

Without customer there would be no projects. They can turn out to be our best friends...I stay in touch with many past clients all the time. But you have to go into an engagement thinking you're the expert and consider it a learning experience for you that you have to make happen. You have to ask the right questions and get to the heart of the issue. And all along, you have to look out for your own interests as well. Carefully word signoff criteria and be sure to get official signoffs at all major milestones in order to ensure that you get the milestone and deliverable payments that are due to you and/or your organization.

Leaving Your Success in Management's Hands

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Leaving Your Success in Management's Hands

Unless you are working entirely as an independent contractor or have your own business, then you're working for someone. And leaving your career entirely in someone else's hands is never a good idea. There are things you can't help and you have to rely on your direct supervisor for. And you definitely need to submit to authority. It's part of your job, it's the right thing to do. But blindly following authority can have disastrous consequences for you and sometimes your projects.

I've found out the hard way on at least three occasions that my manager did not have my best interests in mind when making certain decisions. One had a negative impact on my career with the company I was working for, another had a negative impact on my working relationship with my direct supervisor and one of my employees, and the third ended up causing one of my customers to dump a project that I had been leading for nearly a year.

I believe that our supervisors – for the most part – are trying to do what is right for the individuals they lead... just as we as project managers try to do what is best for our project team members and our customers. However, they have many obligations and constraints that they deal with every day. And they have responsibilities to their leadership which, unfortunately, can affect how they handle your needs and the direction they give you and your teams.

What I'm trying to say here is, we must take responsibility for and control of our own careers. When you think your best interests aren't being served, you must be proactive. You may even need to go over your manager's head... a practice that you don't want to make a common occurrence if you hope to stay at your company very long. But if you're convinced that the only way you can make progress on a major project issue

you're experiencing is to go around your manager – do so. Ultimately, you're serving your customer and you've been tasked to do this by your management and by the customer. If decisions above you seem to be negatively impacting your ability to do your job, you must speak out. You must seek additional help. You must go over someone's head. To not do that is deadly sin number #2.

Summary

Only we can look out for our own best interests. I am not saying we need to always act selfishly. In fact, I don't believe that we ever should really be acting selfishly. But we do need to manage our own careers and assume that others may not always be making the best decisions for what is happening on our projects and the tasks we are assigned to complete. The bottom line – don't blindly follow leadership. It's ok to ask, "Why?"

Trusting Team Members Without Question

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Trusting Team Members Without Question

Another mistake that we often make as project managers is to put too much trust in our project resource. Or maybe a better way to say it is we give them too much leeway. And by that I mean taking their word for granted on whatever they tell us. We know they're highly skilled resources – that's why they're on our projects. But as the project manager, it is always our job to question almost everything – whether it's the customer, the project team, or even sometimes our executive leadership, if necessary. The project is our baby and we must protect its success potential as such.

So what do we need to look out for from our project team? What do we need to question? In my experiences, here are some of the areas, some are obvious, some may not be so obvious.

Estimates

Whether it's figures provided for tasks at the beginning of the project or for change orders that occur during the project, the project manager must question all estimates that come in to them. Developers are notorious for padding numbers (I should know, I used to be one of them) and the last thing you want to do is send a bloated development estimate off to a tech savvy customer who calls you on it. For this very reason it's best to have tech savvy project managers running IT projects. Project managers without a technical background are easily fooled by developers when it comes to estimating timeframes and efforts. In fact, I usually estimate a change order myself and then run it by the developer to get their feedback. More than 90% of the time I'm almost dead-on.

Status updates and task progress

I was going to split these two up, but they're really one and the same. When you get status updates or progress reports on tasks assigned to your team members, ask them questions. A percent complete isn't always going to tell you if there is an underlying issue. Likewise, your team member may be the type that doesn't raise the red flag until the last second when it may be too late to take corrective action. Ask plenty of questions about where things stand on the tasks your team members are assigned. The last thing you want is for the customer to ask those questions of the team member during a weekly status call and have them uncover an issue that you knew nothing about.

Customer interaction

You may find that some of your project team members are interacting with the customer on topics and tasks that you knew nothing about. You can't let that happen – and if it does happen you can't let it continue. There are legitimate times when your team members must work directly with the customer, but you must be aware of those efforts and be on top of the status at all times.

The problem you can run into is that if you have a developer working directly with a customer contact, subtle bells and whistles get requested without your knowledge. The developer – with a big ego and confident that a little extra development work costs nothing – can end up blowing your project budget out of the water with extra work that the customer slips in behind your back.

Schedule conflicts

If you're a project manager running several projects at once, then it's likely that your project team members are working on more than one project at a time as well. Make sure you're up to speed on what other projects and tasks they're assigned to. Be looking out for conflicts that can appear on the horizon. If a project team member is working on another project that is more visible than yours, know its status. Because if it runs into problems and your team member is critical to it, understand that you could lose this individual for a period of time. Keep that in mind as a risk as you address your project schedule on a weekly basis.

Summary

We are usually blessed by being assigned the best individuals available for the projects we are running. I can say that I have personally enjoyed managing probably 98% of the resources that I have had the pleasure of working with on the projects that I have led over the years. But we must always manage a project closely, track our team task assignments well, ask questions to ensure they have proper understanding and are staying on track with their assignments, and hold them accountable for what they are responsible for on our projects.

Taking a Shortcut on Project Planning

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Taking a Shortcut on Project Planning

Like asking for directions on a long trip or reading directions before putting something together, too many times our urge is to dive right in and "be productive" long before we are really ready to do so. That is a mistake...and yes, a sin in the project management world. We – and our projects, customers, and teams - are far better off if we put enough time in the project schedule to plan appropriately for the engagement we are about to embark on. Few things can be more damaging to a project so quickly than to not do an adequate job of upfront planning. And the problem here can be two-fold.

Not planning enough before beginning the engagement

Sometimes your senior management wants a high-profile project kicked off as quickly as possible. Maybe they're getting pressure from above. Possibly, they're getting pressure from the customer. You may be even be getting direct pressure from the customer to get started on the engagement. There can be several 'pulls' that you're getting that make it difficult to sit down and spend the proper time planning your project at the beginning – before it's even kicked off.

This planning portion – that likely falls entirely to the project manager because in many organizations the full project team has not be assigned to the project yet – is critical because it involves getting handoff discussions and materials from Sales, creating an initial project schedule, putting together kickoff session materials, fully understanding the statement of work (SOW), performing initial resource forecasting, and planning out the project budget ... just to name a few. If the project manager isn't allowed enough time for this type of planning to take place, then the project will not be able to start off on the right foot and the project manager will not be properly prepared to kickoff the project and start managing the team, the budget, or even the

customer without some degree of frustration and disorganization.

Not allowing for enough team/customer planning in the planning phase of the project schedule

The next type of planning concern involves creating enough time in the schedule as a placeholder for the planning phase of the project. This generally includes requirements definition and creation of some sort of functional design document. These are critical items – and I will say once again that requirements are the lifeblood of the project. If the project manager attempts to move the project into design and development phases without the proper requirements definition attention then the engagement is likely headed toward scope issues that will undoubtedly affect the budget, the project timeline and most definitely customer satisfaction.

It is absolutely critical that enough time be set aside in the schedule for proper project planning and requirements definition. Shout this one from the rooftops no matter who's pushing you to move forward more quickly. If it's the customer, remind them how important their $$ are and how quickly problems will arise if requirements aren't properly documented and agreed upon. If it's your senior management, remind them how quickly the customer will become dissatisfied and shut down the project when the project goes way over budget or you have to present change order after change order to them to cover all of the miscommunicated requirements. Customer satisfaction will take an enormous hit if this is allowed.

Summary

Failure to plan really does = planning to fail. Without proper upfront planning, we are relying on luck to pull us through...and

that is no way to manage a project or put our career on the right path. Customers may push back, executives may push back, but don't be afraid to put your foot down and insist that the right amount of time be spent properly defining requirements and planning for the project engagement.

Getting Technically Out of Touch

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Getting Technically Out of Touch

I come from a technical background and the projects that I have managed have always been focused on some type of technical solution. I've long held that IT project managers need to come to the position with some technical expertise in their past. If they've been a developer or if they've held some position that allows them to know their way around a technical solution it will lend that much more credibility to them with their customer and their project team.

That said, in no way can past technical expertise carry you through for 20 years or more of project management without some attempt to remain somewhat current on technology. Whether it's trade magazines that you subscribe to, online articles that you search through, conferences you attend, or colleagues you network with, you must remain current if you hope to remain viable in leading successful technical projects. If you are out of touch technically, you're soon going to have trouble connecting with your technical resources. They'll lose confidence in you, you won't be able to adequately assess their work, confirm their estimates, and generally serve the best needs of your team and your customer. I'm not saying you're going to be an utter failure unless you are a technical expert, but you need to stay somewhat current. How do you do that?

For me, I take three routes in working hard to remain current technically so as to best serve my teams, my customer, and my career. I do this through...

Conferences and seminars

I've been fortunate enough to attend thousands of dollars in technical conferences for free this past year because I write technical articles. It's a great way to seek out specific areas and attend sessions to gain further understanding. Not everyone

can do that – and not everyone lives in Las Vegas where nearly every conference imaginable is held at some time or another.

However, there is another way. I get at least 5-10 requests every week to sign up for some free seminar or webinar online on a specific area of technical expertise. Search the web – they are out there. Be proactive ... learn ... take control.

Networking

Networking online and at work with technical experts is a great way to learn new things. Waiting till the last minute to get up to speed for a specific project may lead to resentment among your team members, but asking them or their colleagues in advance – when things aren't so critical – for help understanding a new technology or solution is a great way to learn. And they are often more than happy to share their knowledge – it feeds their egos.

Reading

Finally, reading is probably my #1 way of staying current on technical issues. For me it's a must because I'm also a project manager who writes a lot – and not just on PM issues. So knowing things about where cloud computing is going, what disaster recovery topics are hot right now, etc. are important. But even if you're just trying to get some new technical knowledge for yourself – and not for what you're writing about – reading your trade journals is still a great way to stay current.

Summary

It is our responsibility to remain current as much as possible. As project managers, we certainly do not need to be cutting edge – that is what our team is for. But we do need to have an understanding of what is going on and what technology is being utilized on our project solution. And trust me, it is much easier to gain and keep the respect of your skilled technical resources if you have an understanding of what solution you are implementing. I've witnessed the other side from watching colleagues who were out of touch technically...and it was not a pretty sight.

Discounting Customer Satisfaction

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Discounting Customer Satisfaction

In terms of the projects we manage, customer satisfaction is usually one of the three critical success measurements for engagements within an organization.

What happens if we put too little stock in the customer's satisfaction level? I'm here to tell you that nothing good can come of it. Certainly, you don't do everything your customer asks. And certainly you don't leave them unchecked to create havoc on the project. As the project manager, you manage them. But you must understand their needs and tend to those needs to the best of your ability. It is, after all, their money that is paying for the project. And unless this customer is too painful to ever work with again, it's likely that you want to keep them around as a repeat customer. And you certainly don't want any bad press from this customer because they are dissatisfied, correct?

So how do you ensure they are satisfied? You don't. But you stick to the basics – good project management and good customer management. Give them every reason to be comfortable with you and your team. Schedule your standard weekly project meetings and stick to the schedule. Deliver weekly status reports. Keep them appraised of issues, risks, and the project budget status. It's the little communication things that we sometimes take for granted that can mean a lot to the customer. The difference between a customer who feels well-informed and one who feels like they're being kept in the dark is like night and day.

One more thing you can do as the project manager to help ensure that customer satisfaction remains high is to get your senior management involved in the project. And I'm talking at a very high level. But if it's a visible project with an important customer (aren't all customers important?) have someone high

up in your organization sit in on a couple of project status meetings with the customer. When the customer feels like their project is important to you and your organization and they see that portrayed by some senior management involvement, it can make customer confidence and satisfaction soar.

Try to put yourself in the client's shoes and think about how you would want to be treated and what information you would want to see on a weekly basis for all the money you're spending. Then go out and meet those needs. What happens next may surprise you.

Summary

Nothing can guarantee project success. However, sticking to project management best practices, keeping the customer well-informed throughout the engagement, and working hard every step of the way to ensure that your customer remains well engaged on a weekly basis will go a long way in ensuring that you continue to have a highly satisfied customer. That and making sure you deliver a workable end solution that their users can actually use.

Not Emphasizing Communication Enough

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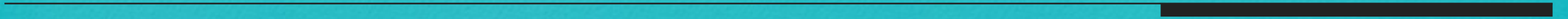
Not Emphasizing Communication Enough

When the project manager considers communication as just another soft tool, they run the risk of having everything fall apart around them at any given time. In my opinion, the ability to effectively and efficiently communicate with your project team, your customer, your senior management and anyone else you interact with while running your projects is the #1 skill you bring to the table as a project manager. There are some things you can fake or skate along without till you gain experience and acquire more skills. Communication is not one of them. Too many things on the project rely on good, solid communication:

- Effective leadership

- Customer satisfaction

- Project team understanding

- Senior management confidence and buy-in

- Cohesive team performance throughout the engagement

- Customer participation

- Etc. ... the list could go on and on...

So practicing effective communication on the project is not just a 'nice to have' ... it's a 'gotta have.' And to me, being an effective communicator as a project manager involves the following:

Consistently communicating project status

Project status reports and project status meetings are more important to your customer than you realize. They are far more important that receiving an electronic copy of the revised

project schedule. Even if you really don't have much in the way of new information in a given week, still hold the meeting. Your customer loves consistency – and it certainly breeds confidence. Canceling a meeting makes it easy for team members to get out of sync. Soon you'll find it hard to get people together for meetings because they are expecting you to cancel them. And get the status report out consistently every week – a day ahead of the weekly status call so that everyone has a chance to review it and get you an update if they see an error or omission.

Monitoring all major project communications

Starting with the development of a Project Communication Plan, the project manager must lay the groundwork for how communication is going to happen throughout the engagement. There needs to be a clear understanding that all important communication is funneled through the project manager and the team and the customer need to understand what types of formal communication will take place on the project and when. This 'formal' communication involves project status reports, project status meetings, adhoc status calls, internal project team meetings, quarterly and phase project meetings, etc. That all needs to be addressed in a plan that is documented and signed off – and followed throughout the project. You'll be surprised how much customer confidence and satisfaction is realized when they are comfortable that all participants are well informed and that you're on top of all-important communication.

Encouraging a cohesive communication environment

This one is important. For your team, it involves having weekly internal team meetings and disseminating all important project info to the team quickly – like through an email list. Be the project manager who sends your team more emails than the other project managers they work with. They'll feel like they are on top of status – because they are.

For your customer, keep them informed, but you don't need to give them every internal detail. Give them the important stuff. Too much of the daily detail leads to confusion and may decrease confidence when it shouldn't. Don't withhold important information, but they don't need to or want to hear every detail.

Summary

Never take project communication for granted. A formal communication plan may be overkill if your project is very small or very short...or both. But it will never hurt to have one and can provide your customer with a great deal of confidence that you are being highly accountable in terms of project communication. Communication is the single most important skill that the project manager can bring to the table, in my opinion. A well-informed customer will stay engaged. A well-informed team will remain accountable. A well-informed executive management staff will let you do your job.

About the Author

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In addition to his accomplishments in IT development, resource, and project management, he has also authored close to 3,000 expert advice and strategy articles on project management, small business, and information technology for his own website as well as sites and printed material for software and service clients all over the world. Brad is highly regarded as one of the most prolific go-to authors on project management general topics, advice and strategy in the world. He often bases his articles on his own personal experiences, successes and frustrations, providing insights on how to combat issues and deficiencies encountered along the way to the average project manager, business owner or strategist looking for help in a given situation.

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