

Ten Secrets to a Smooth-Running Project

By Deborah Hoard

You have that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. It's 11 a.m. on Thursday, and your Friday project deadline is looming. The information that was promised to you yesterday still hasn't arrived. The other project team members seem to have disappeared, and not given you the cooperation, focus, or time that you were expecting from them. Your manager has not yet given his input on the content, and you can't move forward without it. To top it all off, you're getting intense pressure from your VP because the company has to move quickly to compete in a fierce marketplace.

Through no fault of your own, the project you are managing is off track. This happens so frequently that there are businesses that capitalize on this scenario. Companies need help to turn around their complex projects, such as MarCom or product development, that are in serious jeopardy of not meeting their rapidly approaching deadlines. A more systematic approach to project management can effectively avoid delays and keep projects moving forward to completion. So what can you do to make sure your project doesn't reach that critical point where you need to call for help?

Here are some crucial steps to implement during your project that will keep it running smoothly for success. Even better, you'll be able to meet the deadline and budget, gain the cooperation of other team members, obtain the buy-in of executive management, and make your manager happy. . . all with as little stress to you as possible.

1. **Gather the key people you need for your project team.** Ensure that the people who can answer critical project questions are on your core team. They can be anyone from the people who are actually doing the work to those who know the direction executive management wants. In addition, recruit those in the organization who are making the final decisions on objectives and budgets and who will be approving the project at key milestones so you can contact them when needed.
2. **Have a clear idea of what the project should accomplish.** The most common mistake is that the project members are not driving toward the same goal. When everyone is working together upfront to identify the program objectives and the key messages, to define the target audience and the competition, to outline the strategy and tactics, propose the budget, and to determine the milestones and measurements, you'll have won half the battle. It's best to capture the information in a formal document, such as a creative brief used for MarCom projects. This document provides a foundation for the team to head off in the same direction and also be a valuable reference for it throughout the process.

3. **Obtain buy-in from executive management.** Once the final draft of your document is complete, it's time to present it to executive management for their blessing. If the right people are on your team, your plan should accurately reflect management's goals and, therefore, obtaining buy-in is simply a formality. After their approval is received, you'll have their commitment to the project, making it easier to work with their staff.
4. **Know your budget.** As part of the management approval process, the project budget should also be finalized. Now is the time to allocate the available funds among the various project elements. It is best to keep strict accountings of the project costs so there are no surprises at the end of the project – such as running out of money before it's finished.
5. **Create your schedule.** Not having a schedule is like driving and not knowing what roads you need to take to reach your destination. Creating a schedule is easy. Determine the project's key milestones. Assign owners and dates to each of them. Distribute the schedule to the project team; and make sure you update the schedule on a regular basis as the milestones change. That way the project won't miss deadlines.
6. **Set reasonable expectations.** This is easier said than done, but it is important that all team members and executive management understand what can and cannot be accomplished within the timeframe and budget. Pushing the envelope is fine; push too far, and quality – along with deadlines – will slip, and the project will suffer.
7. **Line up your reviewers.** Ideally you already have identified those who will review the project, and you have their commitment to a quick review turnaround. Give them a few days' notice before they need to review something, so they can arrange their schedule accordingly.
8. **Lead weekly team meetings.** To keep communications flowing freely among your team, be sure to invite core members to attend brief weekly meetings to discuss obstacles and brainstorm solutions, provide progress reports, and identify action items. Meeting notes should be distributed soon after to the wider team, including executive management.
9. **Check in frequently with your team.** This can be as easy as a brief conversation in the hallway or a quick email or phone call to find out how things are going. Being aware of the status of the project elements on a daily basis will help you to react quickly to any problems and to resolve them before the project deadline is endangered.

10. **Understand that things will go wrong.** No matter how carefully you plan, it is guaranteed that at least one thing will go wrong. Whether it's a product you're launching that doesn't work to spec or a new VP who wants to imprint his vision on your project, you will encounter bumps along the way. By staying calm and having a strong project team with whom to brainstorm options, you will still be able to keep the project on track.

While these tips won't eliminate last-minute "fire drills" entirely from your project, they will ensure that the fire drills don't become the norm. Remember that preparation at the beginning of the project is best done by creating a strong team, formally documenting the project details, and obtaining management buy-in. For the rest of the project, you simply need to maintain the momentum by holding people to their deliverables and being prepared for that inevitable bump in the road. And, remember, a good sense of humor always makes any project easier to handle.

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Deborah Hoard, Founder and President of Net Results, has over 16 years experience of successfully turning around critical MarCom projects that are in danger of not making their deadlines for such top companies as Apple Computer Inc., Cisco Systems Inc., Informatica, Inc., Maxtor Corporation, and Oracle Corporation. To find out more, visit her Web site at www.get-net-results.com.