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Twenty Common Mistakes Made by New or Inexperienced Project Managers

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You’ve read the PMBOK® Guide several times, taken the certification exam for project managers, passed, and you are now a PMP®. Yet you still persist in making mistakes. Project managers are not infallible. Most project management training courses, even those focusing on the PMBOK® Guide, stress “generally accepted best practices.” What is not taught are discussions on what not to do as a project manager.

The list below shows twenty of the most common mistakes that young or inexperienced project managers make. Obviously there are more than twenty mistakes, and many of these may be unique to specific industries. However, the list is a good starting point for understanding why many project managers get into trouble because of their own doing.

MISTAKE #1: Too Much Detail

Inexperienced project managers tend to become enamored with work breakdown structures. One newly appointed project manager asked me to review his WBS for an IT project. The thirty-day project had 340 work packages and some of the work packages were broken down into minutes rather than hours or days.

While the PM was proud of his accomplishment in the creation of a “micro-level” WBS, he neglected to consider the amount of time and effort required by the team to manage at that level of detail. The cost involved to establish possibly 340 charge numbers and track them accordingly could easily increase the management support cost of the project by fifty percent or more.

Project managers must establish an appropriate WBS level from which to manage. Creating a highly detailed WBS is an invitation to micromanage a project, thus alienating functional managers. Most project managers today do not possess the technical expertise to create such a detailed WBS without functional assistance. Just picture yourself attending the kickoff meeting for a thirty-day project and being handed a WBS with 340 work packages.

MISTAKE #2: Pretending to Know More than You Actually Do

For the most part, project managers today possess an understanding of technology rather than a command of technology, yet persist in trying to make technical decisions on the project. This usually infuriates line managers to the point where they allow the PM to get into trouble just to

show him who's boss.

The size and complexity of today's projects should make it clear to project managers that they must rely heavily upon the assigned subject matter experts and functional leads for technical direction and support. On some projects, such as in R & D, project manager assignments may be dictated by a requirement for a command of technology rather than just an understanding, but this is an exception rather than the rule. Good project managers know their limitations and never try to dictate a solution without first consulting with the true experts.

MISTAKE #3: Preparing an Ambitious Schedule

The more inexperienced the project manager, the more optimistic he or she becomes when preparing the schedule baseline. While ambitious schedules are nice to have, they are often unrealistic and can make matters worse. Customers are never told that the schedule is ambitious and therefore believe the schedule is realistic. The customers then focus on the milestone dates and now, when the milestones slip from ambitious to reality, you have an unhappy customer who wonders what other surprises will show up next.

Another factor to consider is the impact on the functional estimates. Ambitious schedules may require team members to perform at a higher position on the learning curve thus changing the functional standards. Functional managers may not want their estimates and standards to be changes. Also, ambitious schedules may require the company's best functional workers to be assigned to the project and this may be unrealistic.

MISTAKE #4: Overreliance on Repeatable Processes

Companies may spend years creating an enterprise project management (EPM) methodology. The intent is that the methodology will be used on all projects for all customers and from cradle to grave. While the intent has merit, EPM methodologies do not account for every possible problem that can exist on every project. Having blind faith in the expectation that repeatable processes will solve your problems is a mistake. Repeatable processes appear in the form of guidelines, forms, templates and checklists. Repeatable processes are NOT a replacement or substitute for management attention, effective decision-making, or problem-solving. They are simply tools for the PM to use, and as we all know, projects are managed by people rather than tools.

MISTAKE #5: Ignoring Problems

All projects have problems. Inexperienced project managers believe that sufficient time exists to solve these problems only to discover that the costs of correcting these problems later on in the project life cycle was significantly more expensive than making the repairs in the earlier stages of the project.

Project managers cannot be selective in which problems to solve. All project problems must be addressed, and the sooner the better. While it is true that project managers may not be able to solve the problems themselves, they should at least know what subject matter experts they need to address the issues.

MISTAKE #6: Failing to Share Accountability with Functional Managers

In the early years of project management, project managers possessed a command of technology.

During staffing activities, project managers negotiated for specific resources which were then placed under the technical direction of the PM rather than the functional manager. The functional manager still retained administrative control over the resources. Today, project managers have just an understanding of technology and therefore negotiate with functional managers for deliverables rather than people.

When negotiating for deliverables, the functional resources still remain under the direct supervision and control of the functional manager. Under this scenario, the functional managers must be willing to share responsibility for the success with the project manager.

Inexperienced project managers believe that they have single person accountability and responsibility for the project's success. It is a mistake for the project manager not to share this responsibility with the functional managers. Sometimes, executive support is necessary to enforce this shared accountability because it might not be part of the corporate culture.

MISTAKE #7: Gold-plating the Deliverables

Most project managers want to placate the customer. However, there are limits as to how far the project manager should go. Gold-plating the deliverables after the scope has been agreed to can be very costly. In addition, the customer might be led to believe that they can get these gold-plated "add-ons" for free on future projects because the new standard had been set.

MISTAKE #8: Failing to Understand What Stakeholders and Sponsors Want to Hear

One of the requirements to pass the PMP® exam is an understanding

of Cost Management and more specifically, the formulas attributed to earned value measurement. Although there is obviously merit in this, earned value measurement is only part of what stakeholders and sponsors want to hear. It is imperative that, as part of stakeholder management, project managers interview the stakeholders to learn what information they deem as important.

Every stakeholder may want a different set of tracking metrics or key performance indicators (KPI). The project manager may then find it necessary to develop a different performance dashboard for each stakeholder. This could incur significant costs if not planned for in the budget.

MISTAKE #9: Not Fully Understanding Requirements

The more inexperienced the project manager, the greater the likelihood the project manager will use his/her interpretation of the requirements rather than consulting with the subject matter experts. This can lead to misdirection in the technical approach and expensive changes in the later stages of the project.

There are underlying issues that can create this problem, the most prevalent one being the timing of when to bring the project manager on board. The 4th edition of the PMBOK® Guide discusses understanding stakeholder requirements. Oftentimes, it is not the project manager that directly interfaces with the stakeholders initially but more so sales and marketing personnel that may be required to prepare a proposal as part of competitive bidding. The project manager then inherits the requirements and may not be fully aware of the assumptions that went into the preparation of the proposal.

MISTAKE #10: Refusing to Ask for Help

One of the most common mistakes made by inexperienced project managers is the belief that asking for help will make them seem incompetent in the eyes of their peers and management. Nothing could be further from the truth. Good project managers know their limitations and always see out help at the earliest possible time.

Refusing to seek out help can result in schedule slippages, and cost overruns. If the project manager delays too long in seeking help, the number of options to correct the problem can diminish. Sponsors should encourage project managers to ask for help at the earliest possible time, but not to expect the sponsor to be the dumping ground for all problems that the project manager cannot resolve.

MISTAKE #11: Ignoring Problem

Ignoring problems is similar to the previous mistake of not wanting to ask for help. However, ignoring a problem could also mean that the project manager can resolve the problem, but refuses to address the issue as soon as it materializes.

Problems do not go away. Instead, they grow in size, opportunities for timely resolution lessen, and risks can significantly increase. Knowing about a problem and not addressing it can be seen as a “kiss of death” by the sponsor to the point where the project may be subject to termination.

MISTAKE #12: Believing in Saviors and Miracles

Perhaps the most common reason for failing to ask for help or ignoring a problem is that the project manager is looking for a savior or a miracle to solve the problem. While miracles can occur, such as a rapid technical breakthrough, the chances of this

happening are very, very low.

Project managers need to develop early on in the project, a strategy for handling problems. Hope is not a strategy. Rather, it is a faulty rationalization for avoiding an issue.

MISTAKE #13: Making Promises for Rewards

Inexperienced project managers often make promises for rewards knowing full well that they may have virtually no responsibility for wage and salary administration, yet, believe that this is an effective way of motivating the team. Project managers cannot make promises for promotion, overtime, bonuses, future work assignments and other such issues, but persist in doing so.

Experience team members know what project managers can and cannot promise or fulfill. The result is a demoralized team that has little faith in the project manager and do not trust him/her. Team members may also avoid working for this project manager in the future.

MISTAKE #14: Failing to See Dependencies between Projects

Inexperienced project managers are often so enamored with their project that they fail to see anything else around them. The result is that they end up making decisions for what is in the best interest of their project only whereas this same decision may not be in the best interest of the company as a whole.

Project managers must be willing to make business/company decisions rather than merely project decisions, and this requires understanding the dependencies between projects and the ongoing business. Fighting for the best resources in the company may not be a good company-based decision if your project has a very low priority compared to other projects.

MISTAKE #15: Don't Tell the Client They are Wrong

Believing that the customer is always right is not necessarily correct in project management. Although project managers want to appease the customers, project managers must be willing to say, "Your decision or idea is wrong." This is particularly true when customers request scope changes or simply change the direction of the project without fully understanding the ramifications. Some people believe that the single most important word in the project manager's vocabulary is "no."

MISTAKE #16: Show Everyone Who's the Boss

Project managers view themselves as the "president" of the project. While this is not necessarily bad, project managers may need to realize that this is in title only and may come with very little real authority. Project management is often described as leadership without authority.

Project managers that try to show that they are in charge can alienate team members, especially those team members that really understand project management. Sometimes team members will let the project manager believe that he/she is in charge and then use the PM as the dumping ground for any and all decisions knowing that the PM may make the wrong decision.

MISTAKE #17: Failing to Get to Know Your Team

People that work on project teams, especially if organized in a matrix structure, know that they have a home in their functional area after the project is over. Project managers know this as well, and may therefore make the mistake of not finding it necessary to get to know the team since they might never interface

with the teams after the project is completed.

Project management is a team effort. If the PM fails to get to know the team, then the team members may not feel as though they are part of the team. Knowing the team can foster better communications, cooperation, teamwork and trust. And if you do not believe that, this is important, try managing a "troubled project" and see what happens without knowing your team.

MISTAKE #18: Failing to Insulate the Team from Politics

Enterprise environmental factors, especially politics, should not be allowed to impact the performance of the team on a daily basis. The project manager and the project sponsor must insulate the team from politics and other such factors.

Politics can force team members to lose their sense of direction on the project and performance can suffer. Also, team members that are not politically astute can get involved in areas where they have limited knowledge and make matters worse.

MISTAKE #19: Not Willing to Say "No"

The word "no" could very well be the most important word in the project manager's vocabulary. This involves dealings with both the customer and the team. After project go-ahead, customers often try to get the PM to agree to no-cost scope changes in order to keep the customer happy. This can lead to disastrous consequences.

Another reason to say no is when team members complain that they are overworked and try to get the PM to do their job. While it is true that project managers are both managers and doers, project managers must know their own limitations.

MISTAKE #20: Selecting the Right Battlefield

To be good at waging war, one must know when to attack, when to defend, and when to retreat, so as to fight again. Inexperienced project managers tend to lack an understanding of when to fight and when to give up. Instead, they often fight battles that should be fought by others or should not be fought at all. Project managers must know what battlefield is right for them.

Obviously, this list is not all-inclusive. However, it does provide some guidance on the type of issues that project managers must understand. These mistakes can be corrected and can save significant time and money.

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- ***Recovery Project Management: Techniques and Tactics For Reversing Failing Projects***
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