

# **Start your project by planning the people**

**Patrick Onions, The Knowledge Studio discussion forum, 7 May 2011**

## **The cause of all project failure is people!**

Just joking... but there may be a lot of truth to this. Project management techniques tend to be strongly influenced by its engineering background. Project management courses teach work breakdown structures, scheduling, estimating and risk management, yet they usually devote a single module or even lecture to the people-aspects of project management. That's a pity, because improving any one project manager's people-skills will probably have greater influence on their success rate than any new methodology. Of all the techniques, commencing a project by planning the people is a practical step that is easily undertaken and which saves probably the most time and expense later in the project.

Planning the people can be particularly effective when there is a high level of uncertainty, when politics and relationships are important considerations, where project environments are more people-focused than task focused, and when projects involve large, dispersed or complex organisation structures. Planning the people aspects brings greater clarity to a project. Managers can better identify the resources at their disposal, assign tasks appropriately and understand teams better. Individuals learn their roles and responsibilities quicker, formal and informal relationships develop faster, teams can coalesce faster, communications channels develop quicker and there are fewer misunderstandings.

The people planning process entailed providing all stakeholders with an early opportunity to collaborate on the design of the organisation and clearly establish their relationships. The act of planning can establish the professionalism of the project team, and any useful attractive documents that are produced provide tangible evidence of early performance.

Three simple techniques may be employed to start planning the people aspects of a project.

## **Stakeholder analysis**

A stakeholder is anyone who has an interest in the project or will be affected by the project or its deliverables. Analysing stakeholders can deliver several benefits:

- Powerful stakeholders can help shape the project, provide valuable support, contribute resources and run interference.
- Frequent and timely interaction ensures all parties are aware of benefits, progress, problems and attitudes.
- Agendas and interests can be properly understood, and reactions and responses anticipated and planned for.
- Project success can sometimes be highly subjective, and quick signoff and payment can depend on stakeholder perceptions rather than tangible delivery.

Stakeholder analysis may be performed quickly by following a series of steps:

- Identify stakeholders. Projects typically have many stakeholders with varying degrees of interest and influence. Primary stakeholders have a direct influence over the project, and may include the client, sponsors, project team, contractors, suppliers and end users.

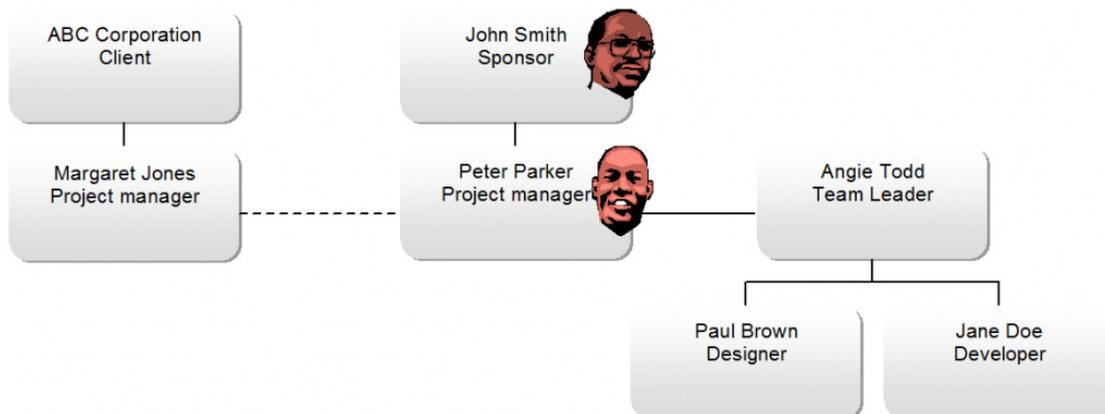
Secondary stakeholders have an indirect influence and could include banks, government, local authorities, activists and the public.

- Identify their expectations, mission or agenda, their strengths and weaknesses.
- Categorise and prioritise the stakeholders
- Predict their behaviour.
- Evaluate the risks, benefits and costs of meeting their expectations.
- Plan responses, contingencies and mitigating actions.

Stakeholder management then follows the analysis, and is undertaken throughout the duration of the project and post project. This involves monitoring stakeholders, managing their expectations, managing the risks they pose or alert one to, responding correctly and guiding the project accordingly. At the end of the day a project is only successful if the stakeholders agree it is.

## Organisation Breakdown Structure

The project Organisation Breakdown Structure (OBS), or project organogram, is a document that describes who is involved on the project and the formal reporting relationships between the parties. Typically this is a diagram that includes only project personnel and participating representatives from the primary stakeholders. It is a comfortable activity for a project manager to begin with, and can evolve through the project lifecycle. An OBS should fit on a printed page, although that may be an A0 on a large project, and may then be posted on the project notice board, attached to communications plans or distributed electronically to project participants. Attaching photographs to names can assist in personalising teams and making introductions and collaboration easier.



Illustrative organisation breakdown chart

The benefits are subtle. An OBS provides greater visibility of participants, facilitates communication and collaboration, describes hierarchies, enables proper escalation and supports resource management. It helps familiarise new or transient staff quickly (especially when combined with a floor/seating plan), and is a quickly digestible diagram to use in meetings and stakeholder communications.

## Roles and Responsibilities

Active project participants need to know what is expected of them throughout the project. Two simple approaches are useful in defining who does what.

A general role and responsibility table outlines the key expectations for positions and groups of participants. A table such as this helps establish what key roles need to do, and ensure agreement between the primary stakeholders as to work allocation:

Role	Responsibility
Project manager	Gathering project requirements
	Planning of the project
	Delivery of the project
	Liaison between stakeholders

Named participants may also be assigned responsibilities using the roles and responsibilities matrix, also known as the RACI matrix. Activities are taken from the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) and matched against roles or named individuals. There are many variations of the responsibilities that are then assigned, but the most common is the RACI matrix. Each roles and activity is assigned as either a Responsible (those doing the work to complete the task), Accountable (those signing off the task), Consult (whose opinions are sought) and Inform (who must be informed as to progress).

Role	John Smith, Sponsor	Peter Parker, Project manager	Team leader	Client representative
Task 1	A	R	C	C
Task 2	I	A	R	C
Task 3	I	A	R	C

This matrix may evolve throughout the duration of the project, with the level of detail increasing as it becomes known. It is typically distributed to all participants and forms part of the communications plan.

## In conclusion

It is usually too late to start considering the people aspects of the project once the schedule has slipped, and this post has identified three formal people-management techniques that will limit risk and improve relationships. Although simplistic, they are effective yet often neglected despite take a few hours to prepare. As a form of networking they should not be delegated by the project manager to an assistant.