COMMUNITY POST

22 OCTOBER 2010

Small Companies—Large Project Management Challenges

by James T. Brown, PhD, PE, PMP

11 Votes

Project management in a small company has its own set of unique challenges. Sometimes it can be more difficult than running projects in large companies.

In general the small-company project manager has fewer stakeholders and less support, but more accountability and more decision-making autonomy. Risks, rewards and job satisfaction can be higher for these project managers.

The topic of this article was suggested by Robert Michaud. He has been managing projects for more than 15 years, and is based in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA. Submit a suggestion.

Focus on three things to assure your success as a project manager in a small company:

Role Clarification

At a smaller organization, you may wear many hats: project manager, program manager, quality manager, etc., etc. The project manager is essentially a one-man band that has to keep in tune and rhythm in a dynamic environment.

You must identify and understand your different roles. Ask yourself: As program manager, I would…; as quality manager, I would…; as training manager, I would…; … for each of the roles you may be performing.

It is imperative that you frame your thinking and perspective regarding project plans, priorities, issues and risks from *each* of these roles. If you do not have that multiple perspective, then your decisions will be made with inadequate context. This can result in problems that will surface at a later date.

Just like there are role conflicts in an organization, you will have internal conflicts because of your different roles. The project manager in a small company will have to compromise among the roles, and it is critical that stakeholders understand those compromises.

Therefore, you must ensure your stakeholders understand these roles. Communicate in a manner that causes your stakeholders to understand your multiple perspectives and the project management process. You want stakeholders with you on the journey to delivery instead of just waiting on delivery.

Capacity/Resource Management

Common to all companies is the tendency of customers and leaders to think all deliverable schedules will still be met on schedule and at a high quality level as they continue to add additional projects and work. It seems to be

the nature of organizations to overload project managers, which can lead to failure.

To avoid this issue in a small company, you must understand your capacity and the capacity of any support personnel.

Aggressively communicate and resolve resource bottlenecks and conflicts with stakeholders. It is important to communicate and get buy-in on *what will not get done* when new work or challenges arise.

Toward this end, you must prioritize your time and available resources to assure good decisions are made. **Have the integrity and the supporting data to say no** when resources and capacity cannot support stakeholder and customer requests.

Strategic Documentation

A big source of failure for the project manager in small companies is keeping too much project information in your head. Projects at small companies have a lot of the attributes and challenges of those at large companies so process discipline and documentation are still important.

Of course, in small companies, time and resource pressures often do not allow documentation with the same level of rigor that occurs in large companies. **You must think strategically about how process and documentation can be adequate but not a burden that impacts delivery.**

Documentation does not have to be pretty—but it needs to be organized and accessible. Additionally, documentation should be prioritized in favor of the most important items, such as integration points between projects and relationships between deliverables and customers.

As a project manager in a small company, keep a log of what you have strategically chosen not to document or when you have chosen to forego a project management process you normally follow. Include the potential ramifications of the decision with the log.

Without a log or similar mechanism to clarify choices like this, it becomes easy to slip into the habit of not documenting something or not following a process without giving adequate consideration to the ramifications of the decision.

Finally, two books I recommend for project managers in small companies are *The One Page Project Manager* by Clark Campbell [Wiley, 2008] and *Scrappy Project Management* by Kimberly Wiefling [Happy About, 2007].

Dr. James T. Brown is president of a project management training company, SEBA Solutions Inc*, and of a web-based provider of professional development units (PDUs) for PMI credential holders,* OnePdu.com*. He is author of* The Handbook of Program Management *published by McGraw-Hill and a keynote speaker on project management topics. Please send your questions or comments to* Dr. Brown*.*

HOME   BACK TO TOP