A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide:
Improving project performance

Appendix C – Characteristics of a successful project manager

This appendix describes the characteristics of successful project managers. The appendix is intended to assist project sponsors in the following:

1. Evaluating the suitability of project manager candidates.

2. Guiding the discussion of their respective roles.

3. Collaborating with the project manager to establish their professional development plan.

Many organizations recognize that advancing their business plan depends on successfully completing projects. Successful projects, in turn, depend on managing many topics, including competent project management. But unfortunately, project management continues to be undervalued in too many organizations with comments like:

1. Anyone can do this work. Project management is a simple set of tasks, not a profession.
2. The role sounds like overhead. The team can manage itself.
3. I'd rather hire another doer like a software developer, an engineer, or a designer.
4. There's a credential to manage a Gantt chart? You must be kidding me.

Project sponsors and project managers consistently seize the many opportunities to communicate the value competent project management brings to their organization.

Project management expertise

Project managers apply expertise from post-secondary education and certifications like PMP to reduce project risks and improve performance.

Project managers are experts at:

1. Delivering projects for the organization under the direction of the project sponsor.
2. Leading technical resources through all the project phases.

3. Consulting with business leaders to refine the project goal, objectives, and approaches to delivering the stated project scope.

4. Managing a diverse set of issues and stakeholders.

Project management experience

Project managers accumulate experience by managing successive projects of increasing size and complexity to successful conclusions. They will apply that experience to improve the likelihood of success for the current project.

Project managers demonstrate experience in performing the following work:

1. Leading the creation of the project charter, focusing on the project goal, objectives, approach and scope.

2. Leading the development and management of a detailed project workplan using a project management software package.

3. Coordinating and prioritizing resources.

4. Leading the creation of the project budget and subsequent tracking of expenditures.

5. Leading the resolution of issues that are impeding success.

6. Leading the risk management process.

7. Participating in regular reviews of project performance led by the project management office (PMO).

8. Leading the investigation and evaluation of opportunities to improve workflows and project delivery to increase project efficiency and shorten delivery.

9. Providing project status updates regularly to the team and stakeholders.

10. Leading the development of project deliverables on smaller projects. In most cases, business analysts and engineers lead this work.

Personal attributes

In addition to project management skills, effective project managers exhibit effective soft skills, including:

1. Leader - Lead a team that may include remote and geographically dispersed members.

2. Facilitator - Facilitate consensus on priorities and issues within the team and with stakeholders.

3. Problem solver - Understand complex concepts and make reasoned decisions with sometimes incomplete data.

4. Communicator - Exhibit excellent interpersonal, oral, written, and presentation skills.

5. Dynamic - Optimistic, ambitious and self-assertive.

6. Quality-oriented - Focused on detail, completeness and accuracy.

7. Business- not technology-focused - Understand the business perspective and provide insights.

8. Analyst - Demonstrate financial and analytical skills.

9. Culturally aware - Sensitive and responsive to different cultural perspectives.

10. Emotionally mature - Stable and unflappable.

Industry and business experience

Project managers with experience in the industry and perhaps even the line of business in which the project is operating will require a much shorter learning period to understand the business context of the project.

Technical expertise

Project managers should not be expected to be technical experts. It's typically counter-productive to appoint a subject matter expert (SME) as the project manager. SMEs are rarely suited for the project manager role based on personality, style and experience.

The team should include individuals with expertise in the various disciplines required to complete the project successfully. However, project managers who can demonstrate an understanding of the project technologies will be more successful in leading a team.

Many actions to address the high-risk observations described in this book recommend mentoring steps for the project sponsor to take with the project manager. If you notice you're spending more time mentoring than you can handle, it's likely time to replace your project manager.