Kick Start the Project

One of the most important ingredients to the success of a rescued or re-planned project is the ability to truly learn from what went wrong in the first instance.

As we have seen projects can fail in a number of areas. Part of the re-planning exercise needs to demonstrate practically that we have learned from our mistakes. Too often I see project managers running into the same problems time and time again.

Most projects fail because they are missing something fundamental. As a project manager you cannot assume anything or take anything for granted. Let's take look at some of the fundamentals.

In order to give the stakeholders confidence the project kick off must clearly demonstrate that the root cause(s) of the project problems have been clearly identified and that the revived project has been strategically planned so that these issues will not be repeated. The project team need to explain how these issues will not be repeated. Monitoring mechanisms will need to be put in place to ensure any potential issues are flagged early.

Project Charter

First off, what is a project charter? A more important question in describing what a project charter is, is why do we need a project charter. Depending on what organization you are in or who you ask, the answer will differ. Let's make an attempt at defining the project charter.

The Project Charter is generally described as a document issued by the project initiator or sponsor that formally authorizes the existence of a project in an organization or company and provides the project manager with the authority to apply organizational resources to project activities. That's a bit bureaucratic isn't it?

I prefer to refer to it as the official evidence within a company that a project exists. A company has recognized the need for a project for a new system or an upgraded system or anew production line......

For me it is the birth certificate of a project. It is the recorded evidence that a company has committed to a body of work.

Now we agree (I hope) on what a project charter is, now we need to look at what it is and what it should contain.

As with other elements of this training course I cannot emphasize enough the need to keep the language concise and accurate.

The Project charter should be agreed upon and approved by the main stake holders whomever they may be and this will differ from company to company.

Let's examine the contents of the charter now:

What is the purpose of the project? (Why is the project being rolled out?)

Again this is one of the most overlooked elements of a project in industry today. Why are we doing the project? Is it a business need? Is it a regulatory requirement, is it a legal requirement? Or do they just have money to spend?

What is the scope of the Project?

I could spend days writing about scope - often when I visit clients when projects are in trouble, scope is the most difficult element to control. Is the scope of the project clear? The most likely scenario is that there are four definitions of scope:

1. What the customer thought they needed.

2. What was defined in the design documentation.

3. What was actually delivered and tested.

4. What the customer actually needed.

Don't be surprised if these are all very different.

What are the main deliverables?

Once the scope is agreed upon, what are the main deliverables required to complete the delivery? This is often down to detail, detail and more detail.

What are the key milestones?

In order to achieve your long term goal of project completion, what are the main milestones that should be monitored and recorded to indicate that the project is on track.

What are the risks, assumptions and interdependencies?

Risk identification, agreement on assumptions and interdependencies are fairly straightforward. They just need some time and focus in order to agree on what they are. Risks and interdependencies will vary throughout the life cycle of the project. What are perceived to be risks at the beginning of the project will often turn out to be non issues, whereas some unknowns may pop up and will need to be managed. Remember you will not be able to predict all issues but you can implement a robust process for assessing and managing issues as they arise.

What is the project budget? Who is on the project team?

Spend as much time on the project budget as you can before submission for approval. Once it is approved any change is tedious and painful. Always link the risk assessment to the budget, try to understand the likelihood of an issue and the impact. Make a concerted effort to estimate the financial impact of the risk and build this in to the contingency budget.

How is progress monitored and success measured?

What is the definition of success? How will you know that the project is on track? When you put the project plan together, ensure that the milestones are clear and achievable.
The charter can be the basis for the formal agreement or project contract between two parties.

Define the Project Requirements

Are the user requirements clearly documented and understood? Is it clear how the main deliverables of the project will satisfy the needs of the business or end user? Has the scope of the project been assembled based on the user requirements?

Planning

In order to produce a plan – you need to understand every task that needs to be performed in order for the project to be delivered. Every task, every document, all items that need to be procured and installed, servers, software and the resources need to do each task. A work breakdown structure should be produced that details all the above-mentioned tasks.

Detailed Planning

There are no shortcuts here – you will need expertise from a number of areas to provide input in order to produce a detailed plan. This may take a number of workshop in order to gather the correct level of detail. Once the tasks have been

listed – the order, inter-dependencies and estimated time can be defined. The tasks must then be assigned to resources to perform the tasks – from this the project cost can be estimated.

If the business needs the project to be completed by a specific date then more resources may be required. Depending on the process of delivery, it may not be possible to resource-load some elements of the project.

The team selection is crucial for success here – choosing the right people that will work together as a team is vital. Don't go on experience alone – enthusiasm, attitude and personality will benefit a project and compliment technical expertise. Ensure that everyone is clear on their responsibilities and roles within the project.

Estimation

Now that the plan has been developed and the costs are known, the risks and dependencies need to be overlaid on to the plan. This will provide a clear picture of the potential impact of the risks in terms of cost and time. Once this final estimate is assembled there may be some higher level approval required, so that all the main stakeholders understand and approve the project, the scope, the budget, the risks, the timelines and the key deliverables. This may be a formal approval in most organizations.

This is also an opportunity for all project team members to refine the plan and provide further input on the task estimation and duration so that they are comfortable with this prior to commencing execution.
Perform a detailed risk assessment in order to identify the potential impact on the project in terms of time, cost or scope.

Project Kick Off

Once the above criteria have been approved a Project Kick off needs to take place. This is normally in the form of a day-long meeting / workshop and should include but not be limited to the following topics:

Summary of the Project – i.e. Run Through the Charter
The Objectives of the Project
Key Performance Indicators
Project Plan
Budget
Project Team
Risks, Dependencies and Assumptions
Monitoring, Governance and Reporting

Also as part of the kick off, define and communicate the Day 1, Week 1, Month 1 activities. This is basically a list of tasks for all project resources so that they are clear on what is expected of them within the first month of the project.