WBS 3.3 : Second Blog; Kick-off Meetings, Communication within

Project Management Plan, and Meeting Minutes

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Introduction

The topics for this week's Blog are to compare the result of projects where a team "kick-off meeting" was held or not. We've been asked to define the benefits and challenges of holding a "kick-off meeting" and the problems and that may be prevented or mitigated when a "kick-off meeting is not held. The second part of the assignment is to identify at least three ways communication skills are necessary throughout of a Project Management Plan. And lastly, explain why I think some organizations don't use meeting minutes and identify at least three benefits of using meeting minutes.

Kick-off Meetings

According to the Project Management Communications Bible, "the purpose of a project kick-off meeting is to formalize the start of the project and initiate the project activities."(Dow & Taylor, 2008) in many of the projects that I have been involved with the kick-off meeting whether you call it that or not sets the mood and momentum for the entire project. While planning this meeting you need to make sure to strike the balance between light hearted and getting things done. If the kick off meeting is too casual with little planning getting done then you end up having to hold a second meeting to really start the project. On the other hand, if it is too structured with nothing but business and assignments then you will stifle creativity reduce the effectiveness of getting familiar with team members and might as well have not held the kick off meeting at all.

An effective kick-off meeting allows everyone to get acquainted, develop relationships and build excitement for the project. As you bring everyone together it is good to introduce the project, team members and responsibilities in a group forum; and to talk about the challenges for the project and build on the potential excitement of the completed project. This is a good time to

articulate the goals, ideas and relate what make this project important. Remember to allow time

for those attending to mingle and talk about the project and their concerns. Prior to concluding

the meeting pull everyone back to a more formal atmosphere and establish goals and assignments

for the next meeting.

The challenges to holding a kick of meeting start with time. It takes time to hold the

plan, develop and hold the meeting. Someone has to decide on an agenda, who to invite, types of

activities, goals and challenges to be overcome at the meeting. Then they need to set up the

venue, order refreshments and develop project distributive materials. Size does matter in this

case. Larger project kick off meetings to be done correctly take more effort. The kick off

meeting for smaller projects can be as simple as a board room lunch-in but you still need to at

develop materials with an agenda, some activities to break the ice and have a goal for the

meeting. It all takes time and invariably money.

One last challenge to an effective kick off meeting is the demographic. How to get the

right people involved and motivated. People are all different, striking the balance needed to

motivate and inspire or "wasting someone's time" in a large group is difficult. Some people are

uncomfortable with ice breakers, yet becoming acquainted is a large part of the kick -off

meeting. How to do that without turning off those people can be tricky.

I don't' have any experience where we didn't have a kick-off meeting but I have had

ineffective kick-offs as described above at both ends of the spectrum. One in particular I

remember was setup by the person with little understanding of how to run a project. This was his

first. The kick-off turned into sitting around a board room table and having the PM tell us, "I'm

the boss, this is how I want things done, my (military) rank (or lack thereof) doesn't matter

because I've been assigned to do this, and let's have fun." This was a difficult project to work

on and at time those working on the project had to go around the project manager to get things

done. Then again I've worked on a project where the kick off meeting was so casual that

nothing was really accomplished. In this instance nothing was done on the project for two weeks

following meeting because we never really had a start to the project. It later turned out that the

person who was assigned to be the PM didn't feel comfortable with leading the project. The new

PM had another much more effective kick-off meeting one week following the new start many of

the processes were well underway.

Communications Within a Project Management Plan

Communications skills are a critical part of all human action and within the context of the

Project Management Plan there are three specific areas I wish to discuss.   From the example of

the a Project Management Plan Table of Contents, page 86 in the text, the topics that catch my

eye are Roles and Responsibilities, Conflict Management, and Staffing Management. (Dow and

Taylor, 2008)

These three parts of the Project Management Plan directly are directly affected by human

enter action. Roles and Responsibilities are where we identify what the major parts of a project

are and who will be responsible for them. People looking to excel may feel they are being

slighted if they aren't given the lion's share of the responsibility and other may feel they are

being put upon because their part is more complex than the next persons. A Project Manager

must help everyone see the importance of their assignment no matter how big or small and to

solicit buy-in from everyone.   They must also listen to feed back to ensure that an assignment

isn't beyond a person's capability and know when to intervene and provide assistance. Making

the initial assignments also take communication just to find out who can be relied on and what other responsibilities they have.

Conflict Management mostly involves conflicts with other projects, work priority and deficits of manning, equipment and funding. When it comes to managing the people involved in these processes it takes on a new role that of managing personality conflicts, miscommunications and motivation. Communication skills are critical when dealing with others. Effective communications is the difference between having the team synergistically working on several parts of a single project or several projects that never seem to come together as they should. Everyone on a team needs to understand the project is the priority. Each part large and small is critical at its appointed time.

Staffing Management helps to identify the right people for the right job. If you are fortunate enough to have people with broad experience levels then staffing can be relegated to finding those who work best together, and then keeping the individuals or groups heading in the right direction. This task can be part of conflict management when dealing with a few ambitious people on the team. Again communication and finding a way to fill the needs of the team members on the project can be significant to successful staffing.

During one of my projects, that of developing an entire Air Traffic Control (ATC) training program for two facilities with three major parts in an extremely short amount of time. I had a team member who was very capable, very ambitious, needed a lot of reassurance and yet had her own ideas of what the priorities were. This person had some great ideas for enhancing a program that was already developed and had communicated those ideas to my boss. She decided that his positive feedback on the potential for your plans gave her an overriding license to put

aside the needs of the team to pursue her own projects. Part of the reason for this was she felt

that she wasn't as important to the remaining process because her part of the project was actually

functioning; therefore she felt she was done. Unfortunately there were things that needed to be

tied into the rest of the program which required her attention.

   This situation required me to utilize the communications skills discussed above in all

three areas. Without dehumanizing her I had to take her aside, review her role in the project

focusing on how important it was. Explain the conflicts that were created had she not completed

the task she was assigned and explain the staffing roles and why she was assigned to the position

she was in. Part of the de-confliction in priorities was to sure her that after the main project was

done she would be free to pursue her own projects. And I would take responsibility with my

superiors for any disappointment they may have had not having her ideas developed. Once all of

this was done she became extremely effective, completed her responsibilities and was able to

accomplish one of two of her own projects.

Meeting Minutes

   The last assigned topic for this extremely long blog is the need for meeting minutes.

Some organizations fail to document, archive and or report meeting minutes. I've done that.

There were times I felt that the meeting I was having was too simple or small and it didn't

require minutes to be drafted. Perhaps the need for formal minutes can a bit overboard for brief

discussions but meeting minutes don't always have to be prepared as a formal document. Thank

heavens for the Post-it notes. Another reason people may fail to use minutes is they haven't been

sold on their necessity in keeping track of discussions on processes; they relegate the

responsibility for assignments to the assigned and don't understand the nature of people to

forget. Lastly we have to discuss just plain laziness. It takes work and some feel they have enough already.

Meeting Minutes can be the foundation for continued progress on a project. Documented assignments, agreements, and future needs help keep everyone stay focused. Sending the minutes out helps remind team members of their commitments. If something is difficult to accomplish and is taking time these minutes place the whole process on a table and may help the team recognize where priority shifts of materials may be needed. Archiving the minutes also helps to develop lessons learned and gives a history of the project. Smaller meetings were less formal documentation is used such as my Post-it Notes example above should all be recorded in the more formal minutes when the subjects are addressed during the formal meeting. The few minutes it takes to record meeting minutes will pay huge dividends not having to constantly readdress things that team members may have forgotten about had the minutes not been recorded and circulated.

Conclusion

So having discussed team "kick-off meeting," three ways communication skills are necessary throughout of a Project Management Plan, and why some organizations don't use meeting minutes along with the benefits of using meeting minutes. This Blog has come to a conclusion. Of course the purpose for these Blogs is to articulate the lessons we've learned and present some of our own, now educated, ideas on the subjects. I think there is enough information out there that entire books could be written on each of these subjects. I would encourage anyone to read up a little more if you have any questions.

Reference

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