Do Stakeholders Fear Commitment?

— Bobbi Stark, PMP, Principal of Integral Process Solutions

In our personal lives, commitment can be a bit scary. Most of us may try to avoid it, but no matter how hard we try, there is no escaping it. We need to commit time to our families, the care of our pets, the management of our finances, and sometimes we find that we have over committed ourselves. Perhaps one of the reasons we are fearful to commit is because we do not always know what we are committing to, nor do we understand the responsibilities associated with that commitment?

These same issues related to commitment follow us into our careers. In Project Management, stakeholder commitment is one of the most critical success factors in laying the foundation for achieving project objectives. Just as there are various types of commitments in our personal lives, there are different 'levels' of commitment for every project.

Below are sources you may be soliciting for commitment to your project:

- ***Sponsor:*** to provide adequate funding
- ***Functional Management:*** to provide the resources with the necessary skill sets to meet project needs
- ***Business units:*** committing to the project team's understanding of the requirements
- ***Project Team:*** to commit to the estimates and schedule
- ***Third Party Vendors:*** to deliver expected scope on-time and within budget

During project Initiation and Planning, the Project Manager needs to act much like a conductor, ensuring that all these levels of commitment are considered, and are working in concert. I am sure we have all worked on projects where these elements were not in tune. For instance; achieving project funding, but not having the resources to do the work, or having resources, but they do not possess the right skill sets. And do our Project Managers engage the project resources in key decisions: are they involved in estimating, and do they also agree with the project timeline? Do third party vendors have enough information related to the scope and requirements to commit to a timeline and cost?

So what can the Project Manager do to not only obtain stakeholder commitments, but manage them effectively through the project's lifecycle?

The following Planning activities are key to addressing issues related to commitments:

- ***Develop a Stakeholder Management Plan.*** Identifying all your stakeholders (including project team members) and working with them to understand their needs and level of commitment is paramount. It is important that this plan list the stakeholders, their role on the project, their level of authority and responsibility (who gets to make the final decisions), and what type of communication they need on an on-going basis to meet their commitments. This plan should also identify an escalation approach for addressing issues. I have found that there is much less 'spinning of wheels' when people know what their responsibilities are, and decision makers are clearly identified.
- ***Ensure estimates are tied to a WBS structure that is based on scope/requirements and identifies all project deliverables.*** Also, all project team members (including business representatives) get a chance to review estimates and agree to them. In order to effectively agree to their commitments, project team members need to understand the requirements, the estimates that have been associated with those requirements, and the timeline expected to complete them. This last step is rarely done and it is so critical to ensuring the team is on board. Even if the team is involved in deriving the estimates, they need to see the whole picture (scope

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(requirements), estimates and timeline of the project) laid out so that they can commit to the whole plan. There have been times when I was rushed to get a plan together, so I collected team estimates and worked them into a plan only to find out that key team members are on vacation during the time I have scheduled their work. The due diligence around completing this last step will help prevent the PM from having 'egg on his/her face' once the project is in execution.

- ***Document all assumptions and clearly communicate them prior to obtaining any commitments.*** Remember – an estimate is merely an estimate. It is based on assumptions, and if the assumptions change, there is a good probability that the cost or timeline of the project will change.
- ***Develop a Risk Management Plan that not only identifies and prioritizes risks, but identifies risk owners, plans for mitigation and if necessary, what contingency options there are.*** Management-level stakeholders need to fully understand the risk of the project in conjunction with the other project attributes when making commitments.
- ***Develop a Resource Management Plan that outlines the type of resources needed, when they will be needed, and what the required skill sets are.*** This does not need to be a complicated document, but does need to provide the functional managers with enough information for them to let you know if the right resources are available when you need them, or if you will need to look at other options (e.g. external resources, or providing training – both of which impact timeline and cost).
- ***When third party vendors are involved, it is critical that you have a Vendor Management Plan that outlines what deliverables are expected and when.*** The plan should also identify periodic checkpoints to ensure that problems can be dealt with early on, before key milestones are missed. It is important to negotiate in advance, what the consequences are if milestones are missed, and how changes in cost or timeline will affect the terms of the contract. I have seen several projects fail when companies contract with a large 3rd party vendor to implement an enterprise tool. This occurs when total control is turned over to the vendor and there were no tangible checkpoints where the customer had good insight as to where the vendor was in the implementation and what issues they were dealing with. These projects ran way over their schedules and many times did not implement the functionality that was intended. The lesson here is that as a customer, we need to take the accountability and provide the oversight to these efforts. We need to obtain enough information on a periodic basis, so that we know the project objectives are being met.

These plans and activities are a subset of the overall planning process for a given project, but they are absolutely critical for managing project commitments. All these items can be scaled to the size of the project, but should be addressed to some extent.

Once in place, these plans become the basis for which the Project Manager will monitor the project. The plans, estimates and risks need to be reviewed throughout the project and adjusted as circumstances occur. Formal change control should be invoked if Scope, Schedule or Cost is impacted, but even if changes do not drastically impact the triple constraints, it is still critical to keep your stakeholders abreast of changes that may impact them. Exercising these disciplines will help drive successful project results and will provide the basis for stakeholders to effectively meet their commitments as well the PM meeting his/her commitments to the project.

Most times in our personal lives agreeing to a commitment is not this formal; however, we should be exploring answers to the same types of questions, e.g. what your role and accountability will be what risks are involved, how issues will be dealt with, etc. So whether the commitment is personal or business related, it is not as scary when you know what you are 'signing up for'.

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