

Project Success Method

Define and commit to the challenge



What a nightmare it would be for a team of mountain climbers to get halfway to the top of a mountain only to discover that (a) they are climbing the wrong mountain, or (b) the mountain is growing taller as fast as they are climbing it. Amazingly, this is the nightmare that many project teams experience in real life!

The single greatest cause of project failure is the tendency for people to wade into a project without first nailing down the project scope, objectives, and constraints. As a result, they set themselves up for two types of disasters. First, they may expend significant time, effort, and money producing a deliverable and then find out that the customer wanted something very different. Second, they are very likely to experience “scope creep” – the tendency of the customer to keep revealing additional requirements as the project progresses. In either (or both) case, the team is destined to fail.

The good news is that this problem can be prevented by the development of a project charter, a document that precisely defines project requirements. The charter is a management document, not a detailed set of technical specifications. Charters should be brief (no more than 2 pages), so that people will actually read them.

The charter serves as the foundation for the development of the project plan. Charters also provide an efficient and consistent way to communicate the project definition to people who did not participate in the charter development, such as individuals who join the project team later.

The process of developing the charter is as important as the content of the document. The charter should be developed as a collaborative effort by the project team in consultation with the project customer and sponsor. The charter development process is a terrific opportunity to build cohesion and commitment within a cross-functional group and begin the creation of a real team.

At a minimum, the charter should contain the following:

- Scope in terms of:
 - Components or deliverables to be produced
 - Phases to be executed
- Objectives – the business motivations for undertaking the project.
- Stakeholders:
 - Project Customer – the person/organization (internal or external to the project organization) for whom the project is being executed, and who must be satisfied.
 - Project Sponsor – an executive to whom the project manager reports with respect to their management responsibility for the project. The sponsor (a) ensures that the project manager effectively manages the project, and (b) supports the project manager in obtaining required resources, organizational cooperation, etc.
 - Project Manager – the individual who is responsible for leading the project team through the development of the project plan and the controlled execution of the project.
 - Team Members – individuals who will participate directly in the project planning and control processes. Many of them will manage the execution of project activities. Others will provide special expertise to the team.
- Project deadline date, as well as deadline dates for major milestones within the project.
- Total cost constraint
- Other constraints, assumptions, and risks

The charter should be formally approved (actually signed) by each stakeholder identified in the charter. If the scope, objectives, constraints, or major stakeholders (customer, sponsor, or project manager) change during the life of a project, the charter should be revised and re-approved by all parties.

If you use none of the other project planning and control techniques described in this book, at least take the time with your team to develop a charter for your project. The chartering process forces the customer to carefully and completely define their requirements, and it builds commitment within the project team. The charter is your best protection against major project miss-fires and “scope creep.”