

Project Success Method

Make mid-course corrections



As with all complex human endeavors, projects almost never go exactly as planned. So a project control process is required to detect deviations from the plan, solve problems, and update the plan. Without a proactive control process, the project will get so far off the track that the plan will lose its credibility. Once your project plan (especially the schedule) becomes nothing more than a wall decoration in the project manager's office, you have lost the ability to manage the project.

Project control is largely a matter of discipline. It involves a cyclical process that must not end until the project is completed.

By far the most effective approach to project control is to hold meetings of the project team on a regular periodic basis. The frequency of the meetings depends on project size, complexity, and uncertainty, but every two weeks is about average. When the team is geographically scattered so that face-to-face meetings are not practical, video- or teleconferencing is an alternative. What doesn't work is for the project manager to communicate with the team members only one-on-one, so that the team members never communicate directly with each other in a group context. The group interaction is essential for reinforcing the team's mutual accountability and support.

To be effective and efficient, project control meetings must be well structured and skillfully managed. The meetings focus mainly on the time dimension of project performance. Remember, the management of the time dimension is the key to success on all three dimensions of performance. Cost information can be gathered outside the context of the meetings.

The meeting proceeds through four phases. First, the project manager calls on the managers of current activities to report the status of their activities. Has the activity been started, and if so, when? Has the activity been completed, and if so, when? If the activity has been started but has not been completed, how much more time does the activity manager estimate will be required to finish the activity.

What problems, if any, are being encountered on this activity? (Note that “percent complete” should never be used as a measure of activity progress. It is a meaningless measure of the past and says nothing about the future. Percent complete tends to cover up problems and is probably the most dangerous concept that has ever become popular in project management.)

Next the activity status information is used in conjunction with the project network to determine the status of the project as a whole. Project management software is helpful in making this determination quickly and accurately. Has the project fallen behind schedule? Has the critical path changed?

The next phase of the meeting is problem solving, which is the main reason for having the meeting. The group works together in a mutually supportive manner to find ways to get the project back on track. How will we recover the days we have lost and get back on schedule? How will we handle the technical problem that has surfaced? Many alternatives may be suggested and evaluated.

In the final phase of the meeting, the team decides exactly what corrective actions to take. Before the meeting adjourns, the project manager ensures that every member of the team understands the solution that has been chosen and is committed to fulfilling his or her specific responsibilities in implementing the solution.

Immediately following the meeting, the project manager produces a project status report, and distributes it to the customer, sponsor, and team members. The report should clearly state the current estimates of the project completion date and total project cost. It should briefly describe any current problems or issues, as well as the actions being on each. Attached to the report should be the updated project schedule, typically in computer-generated tabular and graphical formats.

The project manager follows up with team members to ensure that the corrective actions are implemented promptly. And team members continue to manage their activities on a day-to-day basis until the process has run full circle, and it is time for the next meeting.

This disciplined and highly structured cyclical process is a powerful force in keeping projects on track and moving toward ultimate success.