PDSA

Solutions for the Real World

PDSA Special Report

Project Manager's Survival Guide

Things You Need to Know to Survive any Project

I have been involved in project management for over 30 years. Our special report is a collection of things you need to know to help you survive any project. This list is not exhaustive, but has many important recommendations that you can begin using today.

I have divided the discussion into 5 key areas: the customer, the people, the process, the technology and the connection. All of these areas are closely integrated with any project and the glue that holds them all together is you!

The Customer

What business are you in? Software? No! You are in the business of customer service and should always striving to meet your customer's expectations. Your customer is at the center of people, process, and technology. Don't forget that, or your customer will not be your customer for long.

Expectations are a critical success factor. Expectations deal with perceptions and the art of project management. Constantly focus on stakeholder expectations. Your goal is to understand your customer's expectations and adjust accordingly throughout the course of the project.

The People

It's all about the people. Without the right people you will likely not get the job done: no matter how hard you work. How do you get the right people? Look for:

- **Attitude**: will they fit in? Do they have a positive approach to people and to your customer?
- **Motivation**: this is a key energy source to fuel your project.
- **Aptitude**: brains. Noticed I put this last of the three.

To keep your team on track and well integrated, consider:

- Plan as a team
- Keep the team focused

- Set clear expectations
- Facilitate productivity
- Leverage people's strengths
- Recognize and reward

The Process

Build your application lifecycle processes to enhance and improve estimating and requirements gathering. The two most common reasons of a runaway project are

- Poor Estimates
- Unstable Requirements

Estimating is a challenging skill that every project manager must master. For example, "How long will it take to get to New York?" Yes, I know: it depends. But on what? It depends on your assumptions, or in the case of a system, it depends on the requirements. To be a successful project manager you must be able to develop quality estimates that you can meet or beat. Try doing the following:

- Estimates are iterative and are refined continuously throughout the project. You might need to refine your estimates every day as you understand more about your project. Always keep your customer informed.
- Estimation is based on documented assumptions, models, & templates: build one or more models so you can quickly utilize them to produce quality estimates.
- Estimation is built by your multi-disciplined team: get inputs from all your business and technical domain experts. Do not leave ANY task or activity off the table of your master template.
- Estimates must be real, realizable and tightly connected with the scope and schedule: never and I mean never accept a 'padded' estimate from your team. If you do, you will never really know what it will take to do the job. Accept only estimates based on a model or templates. Never accept an estimate off the top of someone's head.

Requirements are always a moving target. Accept this as a fact. We also know that unstable requirements lead to potential failure. This fact also affects making quality estimates just like we discussed. That is why we must always iterate and refine our estimates. Some handy ideas to help you with unstable requirements:

- The world will not stop so you can catch up.
- Accept change as a way of life.
- Develop processes, tools, architecture to be flexible and adaptable.
- Be structured AND flexible.
- Be balanced and adaptable.
- Be 'agile': consider adapting many agile methods and tools.

The Technology

How many projects fail because of technology? Technology is simply a tool to help you, the PM, achieve your BUSINESS goals. Do not lose sight of that. If you believe that technology is the 'end all' – get out of the PM business. Yet, sound technology decisions are essential for a successful project.

Most projects will require an architecture approach or plan. Every company has a 'de facto' architecture: it is the current or 'as-is' state of their hardware and software architecture when your project begins. Not every company plans an architecture. Hence, your project plans must capture and document the current 'as is' architecture and your project plans must define the future state architecture. Your project plans must also define the steps, process, tasks, resources, etc. to archive the end state architecture.

Your project plans will define the tools that will be used to build and/or sustain the application in a production environment. Standardize your tools and train everyone on the how to best use the tools. We call this 'best practices.' This is very important, since there are many ways to use each tool, but likely one or two more productive and efficient ways. Some tips:

- Don't be leading edge unless there is a business value
- Don't over engineer – keep it simple silly.

- The right tools enable a project to be completed on time, on budget, meets customer's expectations.

The Communication Connection

You will fail if you don't communicate effectively: it is a simple as that. Effective communication is hard, but will greatly help you:

- Manage expectations of your customer.
- Better manage the project team.
- Reduce conflicts and misunderstandings.

Think and plan your communication content. Before you send an email, status report or presentation, be sure that your message is clear, concise, courteous, consistent, and compelling: the 5 C's.

Here is a great 'agile' approach to team communications known as the 'stand up.' And I mean stand up: no sitting allowed. Here is how it works:

- Stand up meeting – no sitting
- Quickly go around the room
- Talk about your status / issues / problems
- What have you done since yesterday?
- What are you planning to do today?
- Do you have any problems preventing you from accomplishing your goal?
- Looking for synergy, teamwork, and what I call "magic"
- Duration: 10-15 minutes
- Frequency: every day when things are intense, maybe 2-3 times a week normally

Summary

I hope this quick overview can help you. Try a few of my survival guide techniques today and you will quickly see an improvement. Remember all projects boil down to 5 keys areas:

- Customer

- People
- Process
- Technology
- Communication

Keep your eye focused on all 5 EACH day. Yes it will be hard, but so worthwhile when you project comes in on time and within budget!

Contact Information

If you would like to know more about the information in this special report, please contact either Paul D. Sheriff or Michael Krasowski at PDSA.

Paul Sheriff

(615) 675-4632

PSheriff@pdsa.com

Michael Krasowski

(714) 734-9792 x223

Michaelk@pdsa.com

Company Information

PDSA, Inc.   **Tel** (714) 734-9792
17852 17th Street   **Fax** (714) 734-9793
Suite 205   www.pdsa.com
Tustin, CA 92780

PDSA.com
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