



# Project Pointers

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Previous newsletters have walked us through the steps required for effective project development. But as we learned, project management brings more complex issues, some of which cannot be put on a Gantt chart. This issue of Project Pointers addresses the **troubleshooting** that may be necessary during the life of the project as well as **project termination**. As always, thinking ahead is key.

## **Contingency Plan**

As soon as the project scope is outlined, begin making notes for a written contingency plan. Despite your absolute best planning, things may not go as you wish during the life cycle of the project. Conditions over which you have no control may force changes in scope, budget or time. And sometimes you may be well into implementation when suddenly you must re-think one aspect of the project. If you plan for change and ask a series of "what if?" questions in the early stages of discussion, you can deal with the inevitable unknowns.

## **Mission**

Even with a carefully crafted scope, the mission of the project may not be understood within the community. If colleagues and other stakeholders do not know the purpose of the project and do not know exactly what you are doing, they will find it difficult to lend their support. First, be sure that project goals have been effectively communicated to the people involved. If you sense a lack of buy-in from colleagues or others, review how and when people were told about the project. It may be necessary to start over, using different methods.

## **Time**

When time becomes the driver, the problems multiply rapidly. Always ask yourself how long the project can be delayed and still meet the scope requirements. If the

project must be completed by a certain date, then ask yourself what changes can occur in either scope or budget. Maybe the only way to meet the deadline is to add extra staff or to request additional monies from the Board. If carpenters are unavailable and hardware shipments are delayed for six weeks, the dedication ceremony may be delayed . . . the ramifications seem endless. The contingency plan should always include steps to accommodate time delays.

**A project is an organized, temporary endeavor that creates a unique product or service.**

## **Budget**

Closely related to time, of course, is the budget. In some projects, the money you thought you had is suddenly reduced or even removed. Even with a written project budget, financial conditions change quickly. When this occurs, think of ways to meet the scope while cutting costs. In some cases, you cannot do this. When you have some room for discretion, think about what might be eliminated. For example, if the new building is supposed to have two microwaves in the kitchen, you might decide to install only one this year. These kinds of savings add up. In some fortunate situations, you may have the luxury of deciding how to use additional resources after the start date. If this happens, invite colleagues and community representatives to attend a brainstorming session; they'll appreciate being part of the decision making process.

## **Staff**

The ink on the Work Breakdown Structure may barely be dry before you discover a problem with the staff allocations for the project. People resign, they take vacations, they are hospitalized and, more commonly, they are pulled off projects and assigned elsewhere. Even when you have assembled an ideal project team, have other people in mind in case of vacancies. When you do have a full time commitment from people, remember that none of us works at 100% capacity week after week. You should not project staff workloads and capacities for more than **80%**. That's the most you can expect from even the best people. As part of your contingency plan, always assume at least one person will be less productive — or even absent — on any given day.

Other types of staffing problems occur once the group is organized. The project team may actually be too harmonious. The people in a group who agree on everything are either withholding their opinions or are too similar to offer the necessary diversity required for good planning. When team members aren't talking or when things seem too calm, problems lie beneath the surface. You might choose to have separate problem-solving meetings and even bring in an outside facilitator to address this resistance.

If the team appears to be unmotivated, look at your performance first. It may be that your leadership is not effective for this particular group. Start with some "check in" routine so people have an opportunity to talk about distractions or concerns. It may be that the meeting time is inconvenient, so people deliberately limit discussion with the hope that they'll get out of the room quickly. Ask! Also, be sure that you delegate appropriately, giving team members credit for their contributions.

## **Vendors**

In most cases, a written purchase order is just that - your request for equipment or services. Of course, you expect these to be delivered on time at the published price. But in some ways you have no control over the vendor's schedule or ethics and you may be placing orders that fall out of your normal routines. If you are unfamiliar with a particular vendor, always ask for references. And ask your colleagues in other area organizations about their experiences. A few phone calls may save you weeks of delay. The lowest bid may not be a bargain. At a minimum, create a tracking system for orders and build in penalty clauses whenever possible.

### ***ANNOUNCING!***

***Successful Project Management***  
***Sponsored by the Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati***

**Two sessions of the same course will be offered:**

**December 8, 2005 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.**

**March 23, 2006 9:30 a.m.- 12:30 p.m.**

***To register online, visit: <http://www.healthfoundation.org/events>***

## TERMINATING THE PROJECT

As the project rolls toward completion, you may find that termination is the most difficult stage to understand. Even when projects are built on clear goals, the ending point may be somewhat vague. Handing over the deliverable or reaching the nonprofit project goals are indications of closure, but some ending signs are more subtle. It may be that support is withdrawn within the organization. Meeting space is suddenly hard to find, the project material storage area has been turned over to another department, or supervisors are reluctant to allow team members to continue serving on the team. These are messages that other people consider the project a "done deal" even if you are still working on ending tasks. Take your cues from your colleagues and try to remember that they may be ready to move on to other work.

About half way through the project, make a checklist of phase-out activities and a timeline for them. This checklist should be distributed to team members and other key colleagues. Be sure and keep notes about what did and did not work well during the preceding months. These notes may be captured in a "lessons learned" report which can then save time and aggravation during future efforts. You also should write and distribute a project report. This will serve as a project history and enhance public relations. Make sure that all follow up details are assigned to specific people and know when they are to report back to you. Finally, formally thank everyone who participated in the project and be sure to plan a celebration event. No matter how busy people are, honor the team at a special event that recognizes their hard work.

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