Key project management skills

Introduction

If you think you don't need project management skills, think again. The truth is, everyone manages projects. Even if it isn't officially in your job title, chances are, you'll have to take on the responsibilities of project manager at some point in your career. And if you can develop the key skills of a project manager today, you're setting yourself up for future career success—no matter what your specific ambitions are.

Project managers are like orchestra conductors—they integrate different roles and functions and ensure they work harmoniously together. They're not just skilled "musicians," they also have a whole different set of skills. They know how to seamlessly blend disparate talents into a cohesive masterpiece.

In this article, we'll lay out the skills of an ideal project manager. If you master them, you'll flawlessly execute projects with less wasted time and money—not to mention fewer headaches.

1. Communication

As George Bernard Shaw once said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Effective project managers ensure clear communication actually happens. It sounds simple, and yet can be infinitely challenging.

"I see myself as the hub—all the spokes of the wheel came to me," says Ilana Ovtchinikova, a project manager in the advertising field. By acting as the central control, Ilana effectively channels and organizes the hard work of those she manages.

Active listening is also a critical project management skill—your team has to feel comfortable sharing their ideas with you. And remember to keep an open mind. You must surround yourself with people willing to disagree with you to be successful.

2. Leadership

While you may or may not officially be anyone's manager, you are leading the project. Thus it is essential to hone your leadership skills. Part of being a good leader is coaching. You don't have to have all the answers, but if you know how to deconstruct a problem and prompt your team to find solutions, you can still be a big help.

Another essential element is earning the trust of those you're leading. You need to build personal relationships with team members, show that you care, and model hard work and integrity. Ask yourself: Are you making people's jobs easier? (If the answer is no, that's a problem.) Seek to understand the obstacles in people's way and either remove them, or support them in clearing the hurdles.

And remember, there is nothing more demotivating than a moving goal. If the benchmarks are constantly changing, people will lose trust and respect for you and stop caring about the project objectives. Consistency and foresight are key.

3. Planning

One of the most important project management skills is the ability to anticipate possible obstacles and bake flexibility into your plan. For example, if you need to deliver a finished product to a client on a certain date, build in buffer time for team reviews and the unexpected things that may fall on your lap. It can sometimes be helpful to build "soft" internal deadlines for things to ensure you'll never fall short on a client deadline.

You need to plan and scope future work in as much detail as possible. Setting project milestones (and a workback schedule to get there) helps your team align clearly on what needs to happen. You can do this in a spreadsheet, a physical chart, or project management software. The exact form is not as important as the substance. Essentially you need to answer the question, "Who does what when?"

You can also use a tool like Forecast to help plan your team's workload. Engineering practice Cooper Perkins uses Forecast to project their team's availability and plan accordingly. "Forecasting lets us understand how many resources are available at any given time, and allows us to plan in a way that maximizes our utilization of engineers' time," says Genevieve Laing, Director of Engineering.

4. Problem-solving

The hard truth is, no matter how well you plan, things will inevitably go wrong. Even the most adept project manager cannot avoid it. That's why the ability to solve problems on the fly is a crucial project management skill. If you can seamlessly adjust to new factors—a supplier who has critical materials on backorder, an unexpected PR kerfuffle, a global crisis—then you can keep your project on the rails.

Ideally, a project manager should also be a source of calm. If you're stressed, it will rub off on your team, and likely make it harder for them to stay focused on the task at hand. It can be helpful to separate the stress from the stressors around you—that is, the physical effects of stress versus the actual problems that need to be solved. Both need to be addressed, but in different ways. The former might need a few deep breaths or a good vent with a loved one, whereas the latter might need a brainstorming session and a project plan.

5. Time management

To deliver high-quality work on schedule, you need to manage your time. It can help to measure progress against project milestones and course-correct where necessary. You can use a tool like Harvest to measure the hours you've used vs. the amount of budget left. It can be illuminating to compare your progress on a given project to a similar project you completed previously to gauge what a reasonable schedule is.

Zehner, a digital agency based in Los Angeles, uses Harvest to track every active client project as well as internal initiatives. They look at projects from hours budgeted versus hours used, and use that as an indicator of project health. "Using Harvest and Forecast, we can see if a project is in danger of going off track," says COO Michael Kucera. "It gives us the ability to course-correct those things way before they actually become problems."

6. Prioritization

Without prioritization, the dreaded "scope creep" can sneak in. That is, a project seemingly gets bigger and more convoluted every day. Prioritization can get derailed when clients or stakeholders don't understand what they're asking for and demand too much, too quickly. For example, if they've never designed a website, they may not understand how labor-intensive their requests are.

The more work you do up front to clarify your vision, the easier it is to prevent and manage scope creep. If you have clear boundaries around what is and is not in the scope of a project—ideally written down—it's easier to push back if others try to extend the scope of the project. You can simply reference your original plan.

7. Delegation

For project managers, a project can start to feel like your baby. You may be reluctant to give up control over parts of the project that you hold dear. But the ability to relinquish control and let others own tasks is essential.

According to the Harvard Business Review, delegation can be one of the hardest project management skills to master. But the bright side is that when you cultivate this skill, you'll free yourself up to work on the highest priority items, and the ones that you as a project manager, are uniquely positioned to do exquisitely.

The thrill of impeccable project management skills

Project management is what's known as a meta-skill. Whether you're a designer, an engineer, or a copywriter, mastering project management will make the quality of everything you produce infinitely better. You won't regret making the investment in beefing up these key project management skills. And nothing beats the feeling of confidently playing conductor and leading your team to play together in perfect harmony.

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