

Inside Perspective

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How to keep good projects from going bad

Joe Grinstead, Director of Consulting Services Group

It all seems so exciting at first: that new application or process that's going to solve all your woes, that cool new whiz-bang hardware with all the flashy lights. You've slugged it out with the vendors to get the best pricing, and with the CFO to get the budget. The hard work is done. Now is the time to sit back—visions of presentations at HIMSS and maybe an article or two, along with accolades from your peers, dancing in your head.

But then you wake up. We all know it's not this easy; there's a lot of work between the purchase order and the applause. There's the "real" work of building dictionaries and running cables—and there's the project management that keeps everything moving ahead, and on track. It doesn't all get done by itself. And it's at the project management level where so many well-conceived, well intentioned projects go bad. We've all heard the horror stories, and we've all said, "Glad that wasn't me!"

What does project management really mean?

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines a project as "a planned undertaking." Management is defined as "judicious use of means to accomplish an end." So, project management could be defined as the "judicious use of means to accomplish a planned undertaking."

Good project management is like conducting an orchestra. The project manager is the conductor. She coordinates the activities of many people to achieve a desired end...the music. The conductor doesn't play a single instrument and may not even know how to play most of them. Her job is to get everyone playing the same song, in the same tempo, bringing in certain players for solos at the right time. Sometimes the conductor even has to coordinate all of this with actors on the stage, or with fireworks.

Project managers figure out what needs to get done. They make sure everyone knows their part. They keep everyone moving along at the right pace to get the desired outcome—on-time, on-budget delivery.

Back to our definition: "judicious." Project management shouldn't be more complex than the project itself. Good project management scales up and down to meet the needs of the task and the organization. Installing a server for a small departmental application is certainly different than coordinating a massive HCIS installation or upgrade. But it doesn't pay to not apply appropriate project management tools and techniques. The key here is to apply them, well, judiciously.

And then there's "means," something useful or helpful to a desired end. Any number of means exist to help manage projects. Most everyone knows about plans, issues logs, and status reports. But people often overlook the foundational tools such as charters, scope statements, and critical paths to help assure successful project outcomes.

The three phases of project management.

Phase I: Preparation. This is where you lay the groundwork for success. First, get a clear definition of the goals, who is involved, who is in charge, and what is and isn't included.

Use a project charter document to define these items and get buy-in from the project team and the executive sponsor. A good charter includes an organization chart showing governance, issues management/escalation, scope statement, and project objectives, along with a high-level critical path to show the intended timeline. Get everyone on-board, as early as possible.

The other item on your to-do list during the preparation phase is the detailed work plan. Everyone should participate in developing the plan, and all should agree to it. Some projects have one work plan; bigger undertakings may require multiple work plans that roll up into one master plan. Microsoft Project is a good tool to help with this; Excel and Word can also be perfectly workable for less complex projects. At minimum, the plan must define the tasks at a reasonable level of detail, including descriptions, start and end dates, and responsibilities. A good rule of thumb for detail level is to consider the work in weekly blocks.

Phase II: Execution. You've got everyone on-board, and they understand their roles and the rules. The plan tells them what to do. Just about done, right?

Obviously, there's more work to do. Stuff happens. Tasks don't get done, equipment doesn't arrive on time, people leave the organization. Sometimes project managers find themselves facing an onslaught of issues that get in the way of the project. The good news is, you've set yourself up for success during preparation. You agreed on roles, responsibility, and timelines. You also agreed on governance. Now it's time to pull out the issues logs and status reports. From those status reports and regular meetings and communication, you can figure out where the sticky spots are. Use your governance and issues escalation process to get these issues in front of the right people. Remember, your executive sponsor is the one who wants this done; he/she should be right there with you removing road blocks and helping to solve problems.

Update that project plan as things progress and change. Nothing helps you get a better picture of the project than looking at the plan and seeing where things are getting done on schedule and where things are slipping. This also helps you look down the road and prepare for other things that might slip because certain tasks are running behind.

Communicate often and keep everyone informed. Nothing breaks a project faster than the string section getting out of sync with the trombones.

Phase III: The Afterglow. OK, maybe "afterglow" is a slight exaggeration. The point is that project management doesn't stop when the plan ends. There are still two important things you need to do.

First, CELEBRATE! Punch and pie are required here. People work hard, they deserve to be recognized and to celebrate their achievement.

Second, learn. Like everything we do in a hospital, we are continually learning and improving performance. Look back at the issues and the status reports. Sit down with your team and discuss what everyone could do better next time. Maybe you need to add a section to your charter template to better clarify the rules of the game. Maybe the issues log needs a new column. Maybe it was all just dandy; there's certainly nothing wrong with that!

So now, you've managed the project, the data is flowing, and the accolades are ringing in your ears. Or is that the phone ringing? Maybe it's HIMSS calling for that presentation—or maybe it's the next project. Either way, you're ready.

Project management at JJWild

Working in MEDITECH organizations, JJWild consultants encounter various levels of understanding of project management—and what it really means. We work with our clients to leverage generic project management tools, along with more specialized tools we have developed based on our experience with MEDITECH hospitals. But we also recognize that

every hospital and every project is different. Organizational culture, budgets, and resources have to be considered when projects are set up, and there's simply no single template that can be applied across the board.

If you would like to learn more about how we'd work with you on your specific project, we're always ready to talk.

Joe Grinstead has over a dozen years of MEDITECH-focused healthcare experience. As a former regional CIO of a four-hospital system in San Antonio, he has a broad understanding of the IT issues across the healthcare continuum. Email him at editor@jjwild.com.

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