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How to Get Things Done

By Jeff Oltmann

Avoid the Mire

Some projects get off to a fast start, but soon lose momentum and become mired. You can do two things to avoid this fate on the projects you lead.

- Create a project culture that favors action.
- Implement a consistent system for measuring progress on projects.

Read on to see how.

Build an Action Environment

First, invest in building a project environment that values getting things done. As a leader, your behavior sets tone and expectations. Personally demonstrate four behaviors – driving, delegating, listening and measuring – that show you're serious about action and progress.



1 Drive – Personally drive things forward, and show your team how to do the same.

- Use gates, milestones, and reviews to force action. NASA program manager James T. Brown comments, “The added milestone forces an assessment, and the assessment forces work to get done.” (Brown, p. 111)
- Consistently require people to take action items, then follow up on them. Use issue logs to make sure that problems are getting attention and are being solved.
- Use tiger teams to focus intense energy on solving specific problems that are impeding progress. Create war rooms to promote teamwork and communication across functions.

- Use change control to maintain integrity and minimize thrash and confusion. At the same time, remember that requirements inevitably change, so stay flexible.

2 Delegate – Build an environment where people and teams can do excellent work without you. The Agile development movement highlights the destructiveness of micromanagement. If everything has to go through you, you become the bottleneck that impedes progress. Instead, provide a good working environment and clear indicators of status that everyone can see, so the team can do most of the day-to-day driving itself.

3 Listen - Develop a reputation for an open mind and an open door. Good listening skills give you a sixth sense for upcoming obstacles, so you can anticipate and remove them before they impede progress. Actively looking for input from others also helps you correct for your blind spots. Without that correction, you may lead the project into a dead end.

4 Measure – What gets measured gets improved. Good measurement gives you the information you need to steer the project in the right direction.

Measure Progress

Running a project is like piloting a plane. The baseline plan is a flight plan, mapping out the route to the destination. The pilot uses a GPS navigation system to determine the plane's position and whether it is on course. Similarly, a project manager needs a GPS to determine where his project is. Status monitoring is part of a project's GPS system.

A good status process distributes "position fix" information, increases accountability, illuminates obstacles, and improves communication. Brown says,

'A project status process is one of the greatest opportunities to establish a positive, disciplined project management culture. In fact, if you exist in an environment that has poor or non-existent project management processes, the first process that should be rolled out and matured is the project status process. ... I am sure Ronald Reagan had the project status process in mind when he said, "Trust but verify." These three words sum up the purpose of a good project status process.' (Brown, p. 116)

Four Benefits of a Status Monitoring Process

1. **Aligns decisions:** It gives program and project teams the information they need to make good decisions.
2. **Improves accountability:** It creates widespread awareness of the status of projects and eliminates ignorance as an excuse.
3. **Increases communication:** Communication inside and outside the project is the glue that allows people to work together.
4. **Removes roadblocks:** Clear status illuminates obstacles that program and project managers can resolve.

Good status processes share these characteristics:

1. **Simple:** Gathering information and administering the system is not a huge burden. Status summaries are easy to read and understand.
2. **Consistent:** The process is applied consistently across projects and over time. Otherwise, no one will take it seriously. Consistency is easier to achieve using a simple status monitoring process.
3. **Public:** Appropriate status is easily available to everyone so they can use it to inform their actions and make good decisions.
4. **Inclusive:** All projects, regardless of type, use the status process, scaled appropriately for each project's size and complexity. This is the only way that managers can compare information and make tradeoffs across projects.
5. **Can be escalated:** Escalation is a normal business method for quickly making tough tradeoffs and decisions. The status process should encourage rapid escalations.

You can choose from a wide variety of building blocks for your status process. These range from simple milestone charts to dashboards to sophisticated earned value systems. Each one has advantages and disadvantages, but what is most important is that you give your projects a disciplined status process that fulfills these five characteristics.

Endpoint

Don't let your projects become stuck in the mire. First, teach your team to drive, delegate, listen, and measure. Second, trust - but verify. Establish a simple and consistent status process that provides vital navigation information and forges a disciplined culture of action.

You can find more articles on getting things done and other project topics at http://www.spspro.com/SPS_cases_papers.htm

James T. Brown, [The Handbook of Program Management](#), 2008, McGraw-Hill

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