Eleven Common Mistakes Made by New or Inexperienced Project Managers

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The list below shows eleven of the most common mistakes that young or inexperienced project managers make. Obviously there are more than eleven mistakes, and many of these may be unique to specific industries; however, the list is a good starting point for understanding why many project managers get into trouble because of their own doing.

MISTAKE #1: Pretending to Know More than You Actually Do

Generally, project managers today possess an understanding of technology rather than a command of technology, yet persist in trying to make technical decisions on the project. This usually infuriates line managers, causing them to show who is boss.

The size and complexity of today’s projects should make it clear to project managers that they must rely heavily upon the assigned subject matter experts and functional leads for technical direction and support. On some projects, such as in R & D, project manager assignments may be dictated by a requirement for a command of technology rather than just an understanding, but this is an exception rather than the rule. Good project managers know their limitations and never try to dictate a solution without first consulting with the true experts.

MISTAKE #2: Preparing an Ambitious Schedule

The more inexperienced the project manager, the more optimistic he or she becomes when preparing the schedule baseline. While ambitious schedules are nice to have, they are often unrealistic and can make matters worse. Customers are never told that the schedule is ambitious and therefore believe the schedule is realistic. The customers then focus on the milestone dates and now, when the milestones slip from ambitious to reality, you have an unhappy customer who wonders what other surprises will show up next.

Another factor to consider is the impact on the functional estimates. Ambitious schedules may require team members to perform at a higher position on the learning curve thus changing the functional standards. Functional managers may not want their estimates and standards to be changed. Also, ambitious schedules may require the company’s best functional workers to be assigned to the project and this may be unrealistic.
MISTAKE #3: Ignoring Problems

All projects have problems. Inexperienced project managers believe that sufficient time exists to solve these problems only to discover that the costs of correcting these problems later on in the project life cycle was significantly more expensive than making the repairs in the earlier stages of the project.

Project managers cannot be selective in which problems to solve. All project problems must be addressed, and the sooner the better. While it is true that project managers may not be able to solve the problems themselves, they should at least know what subject matter experts they need to address the issues.

MISTAKE #4: Failing to Share Accountability with Functional Managers

In the early years of project management, project managers possessed a command of technology. During staffing activities, project managers negotiated for specific resources which were then placed under the technical direction of the PM rather than the functional manager. The functional manager still retained administrative control over the resources. Today, project managers have just an understanding of technology and therefore negotiate with functional managers for deliverables rather than people.

When negotiating for deliverables, the functional resources still remain under the direct supervision and control of the functional manager. Under this scenario, the functional managers must be willing to share responsibility for the success with the project manager.

Inexperienced project managers believe that they have single person accountability and responsibility for the project’s success. It is a mistake for the project manager not to share this responsibility with the functional managers. Sometimes, executive support is necessary to enforce this shared accountability because it might not be part of the corporate culture.

MISTAKE #5: Refusing to Ask for Help

One of the most common mistakes made by inexperienced project managers is the belief that asking for help will make them seem incompetent in the eyes of their peers and management. Nothing could be further from the truth. Good project managers know their limitations and always seek out help at the earliest possible time. Refusing to do so can result in schedule slippages, and cost overruns.

If the project manager delays too long in seeking help, the number of options to correct the problem can diminish. Sponsors should encourage project managers to ask for help at the earliest possible time, but not to expect the sponsor to be the dumping ground for all problems that the project manager cannot resolve.
MISTAKE #6: Ignoring Problems

Ignoring problems is similar to the previous mistake of not wanting to ask for help. However, ignoring a problem could also mean that the project manager can resolve the problem, but refuses to address the issue as soon as it materializes.

Problems do not go away. Instead, they grow in size, opportunities for timely resolution lessen, and risks can significantly increase. Knowing about a problem and not addressing it can be seen as a “kiss of death” by the sponsor to the point where the project may be subject to termination.

MISTAKE #7: Making Promises for Rewards

Inexperienced project managers often make promises for rewards knowing full well that they may have virtually no responsibility for wage and salary administration, yet, believe that this is an effective way of motivating the team. Project managers cannot make promises for promotion, overtime, bonuses, future work assignments and other such issues, but persist in doing so.

Experienced team members know what project managers can and cannot promise or fulfill. The result is a demoralized team that has little faith in the project manager and do not trust him/her. Team members may also avoid working for this project manager in the future.

MISTAKE #8: Failing to See Dependencies between Projects

Inexperienced project managers are often so enamored with their project that they fail to see anything else around them. The result is that they end up making decisions for what is in the best interest of their project only whereas this same decision may not be in the best interest of the company as a whole.

Project managers must be willing to make business/company decisions rather than merely project decisions, and this requires understanding the dependencies between projects and the ongoing business. Fighting for the best resources in the company may not be a good company-based decision if your project has a very low priority compared to other projects.

MISTAKE #9: Show Everyone Who’s the Boss

Project managers view themselves as the “president” of the project. While this is not necessarily bad, project managers may need to realize that this is in title only and may come with very little real authority. Project management is often described as leadership without authority.

Project managers who try to show that they are in charge can alienate team
members, especially those team members that really understand project management. Sometimes team members will let the project manager believe that he/she is in charge and then use the PM as the dumping ground for any and all decisions knowing that the PM may make the wrong decision.

**MISTAKE #10: Failing to Get to Know Your Team**

People who work on project teams, especially if organized in a matrix structure, know that they have a home in their functional area after the project is over. Project managers know this as well, and may therefore make the mistake of not finding it necessary to get to know the team since they might never interface with the teams after the project is completed.

Project management is a team effort. If the PM fails to get to know the team, then the team members may not feel as though they are part of the team. Knowing the team can foster better communications, cooperation, teamwork and trust. And if you do not believe that this is important, try managing a “troubled project” and see what happens without knowing your team.

**MISTAKE #11: Not Willing to Say “No”**

The word “no” could very well be the most important word in the project manager’s vocabulary. This involves dealings with both the customer and the team. After project go-ahead, customers often try to get the PM to agree to no-cost scope changes in order to keep the customer happy. This can lead to disastrous consequences.

Another reason to say no is when team members complain that they are overworked and try to get the PM to do their job. While it is true that project managers are both managers and doers, project managers must know their own limitations.

Obviously, this list is not all-inclusive. However, it does provide some guidance on the type of issues that project managers must understand. Luckily, these mistakes can be corrected and can save significant time and money.
About the Author

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HAROLD KERZNER is Senior Executive Director of Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has a MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 37 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers, and has published more than 50 college textbooks on project management, including later editions. His three latest books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, and (3) Project Recovery: Case Studies and Techniques for Overcoming Project Failure.

He travels around the world each year conducting project management lectures in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, South Africa, Germany, Spain, Belgium, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, France, Italy, England and Switzerland.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award for his contributions to the field of project management
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management
- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management
- The Project Management Institute (PMI) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world
- PMI also awards four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management

For more information about Dr. Kerzner, his books or his speaking schedule, visit www.iil.com.