

10 KEYS TO PROJECT MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE

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Project management (PM) is the centerpiece of design and construction organizations. Many firms have only basic or partially developed project management systems. The benefits of improving your PM system are many, including better client service, less staff turnover, higher profits and improved communications. Achieving project management excellence requires constant effort. There are 10 keys to project management excellence.

1. Access to information. Project managers must have complete information about their projects. This includes regular project status reports, details on outstanding accounts receivable on their projects, schedule updates, staff availability, and dozens of other pieces of information. Ideally, this information should be "on demand" where the firm's computer network is designed to allow immediate access to data. By collecting daily time sheets (preferably by using electronic time sheets), time charges may be posted each day allowing a project manager almost up-to-the-minute status reports when they arrive the next morning. This same access should be available on outstanding accounts receivable and other data.

Data bases of past project histories, cost information, schedules and programs, consultants, contractors and subcontractors and other material must be available to project managers. These data bases must also be on an "on demand" basis. It is vital to keep this information up-to-date.

2. Dedication to service. Firms focused on project management excellence have a total commitment to client service. Their entire project management structure is focused on meeting client needs, on achieving schedule deadlines, staying within the design budget and, as much as possible, within the construction budget. Dedication to service is the driving force of these firms even where short-term profits may suffer. Project managers understand this and are judged on successful relationships, not on the profit level of any particular project.

All aspects of the organization are focused toward client service. Often, little things make the difference. Firms committed to project management excellence have voice mail systems, however a person always answers the telephone. Voice mail is used only for messages. Callers are never left on an excessive hold and everyone in the organization is courteous and does their best to help. E-mail is not used as a substitute for personal communications. Internal communications are excellent allowing all team members to be current on project status and problems. As a result, every team member can be of assistance to clients, consultants, contractors and others.

3. Excellent communication skills. In design and construction organizations committed to project management excellence, project managers are good communicators. Written, verbal and listening skills are all highly developed. It is the obligation of the organization to enhance these skills through training, support, and encouragement. Necessary forms and systems, clear lines of communication, written position descriptions, clear organizational systems, a written project management manual and dozens of other communication support structures exist.

Excellent internal communications requires an efficient meeting process to quickly provide a forum for discussion and to convey needed information. Project managers do not need to write every letter, memo or report or attend every meeting. However, those who prepare these items must allow the PM the opportunity to review their efforts. Individuals who attend meetings must inform the project manager of discussions, decisions and directions.

Excellent external communications requires an understanding of the information needs of outsiders. Clients want to be kept informed and to input on decisions. Consultants and contractors need information to quickly, correctly and efficiently complete their work.

4. Continuous improvement. Complacency is an enemy. "If it isn't broken, don't fix it" is the path to failure. The world changes constantly. Economics, regulations, laws, codes, client needs, the labor force, technology, terminology, ecology--they all constantly change. Your project management system must adapt to meet these challenges. Some aspect of your PM system can always be improved. New ideas come along every day. Borrow from others within and without our industry and adapt it to your situation. No organization is so perfect that it can't be improved. Develop the philosophy of what economist Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction" in your firm.

5. Staff development. This requires far more than simply providing the occasional in-house seminar or paying for a project manager to attend a workshop. Staff development includes a very broad range of activities. For example, your firm must provide a pleasant, challenging workplace with competitive salaries and fringes. Make sure you have up-to-date tools and systems.

There are many other aspects to staff development. You must have an aggressive "cross-training" program. This is intended to enhance client service by having many team members capable of responding to client needs. Cross-training provides ready, able and willing individuals to fill roles in growing organizations. Most importantly, cross-training provides everyone in your office with a better understanding of others' information needs, problems, methods, etc. and improves all around performance.

Mentoring is another aspect of staff development. Mentoring can be informal where a more experienced individual takes a junior employee under their tutelage. A formal mentoring program requires a much more extensive investment requiring the development of career paths, training methods, testing processes, etc. Few firms in the construction industry have formal mentoring programs. Less costly informal programs should be strongly encouraged by senior management. This process begins by matching senior staff with less experienced individuals.

6. Roles and responsibilities. Firms seeking project management excellence have complete clarity of the roles and responsibilities of all individuals within the firm. Written position descriptions exist and are followed. Organization charts are laid out and followed. Initiative and decision-making are encouraged. Individuals within the organization must have a rough equality of responsibility and authority. Any significant imbalance in this relationship will severely hinder job performance. "Taking responsibility" is not likely to happen if the individual in question lacks authority, training and the proper tools.

For project managers, decision-making requires three steps. First, is the authority to make decisions without being second-guessed by senior management. Second, is the willingness to make decisions. Third, is the capability to make the right decision. If any one of these three elements is absent then PM's will not perform to the best of their ability

7. Technology use. Keeping current on technology is a great challenge for many organizations. A computer purchased today was out-of-date six months ago. The pace of change is incredible. Much hardware (especially computers) seem to have a useful shelf life of 12 to 18 months although plotters and printers generally have a longer useful life. Manufacturers produce new software versions often with only minor enhancements, but still different enough to require you to make the investment in an upgrade.

Firms seeking project management excellence strive to balance economics with the need to have the proper technology. Your staff must have the correct tools to do their work. However, the absolute latest technology may not be necessary if your current systems are satisfying staff, client, consultant and contractor needs.

8. Leadership skills. Senior staff in organizations striving for project management excellence is responsible for providing the firm with leadership, direction and goals. The keys outlined in this article should guide their decision-making and planning activities. They must avoid becoming so involved in day-to-day project activities that they fail to provide leadership for the firm. It is their job to set goals, provide and muster the resources to achieve goals, communicate them to all parties (staff, clients, etc.) who will help to achieve the goals, and to see that goals are achieved.

On the project level, the project manager must provide this same leadership for the project team. A project scope, schedule and budget are the goals for the project. It is the project manager who provides the leadership to meet these objectives. Project managers also must keep in mind that their team includes not only the staff they see in their office each day, but also includes the client, consultants, contractors, suppliers and all others involved in the project. The project manager must provide leadership to these individuals as well.

9. Technical excellence. You and your firm are hired by clients for your skill and ability to meet a need. Your expertise is needed by clients. Technical excellence means not only accurately performing engineering calculations, but also being aware of unmet client needs. During the course of a project, you may observe a problem with a facility, find a better way of helping the client solve a problem, uncover a way to save design or construction costs, etc.

Communicate these ideas to clients, consultants and contractors. Be willing to embrace new delivery methods such as Partnering, Commissioning, design-build and other methods and ideas.

10. Documentation excellence. The organization achieving project management excellence keeps well-organized and comprehensive records. Information is the life-blood of your firm. Project managers must learn what to document, how to document, when to document and whom to copy (and when). Keeping everything does not make sense, however, incomplete documentation may lead to disputes and future conflict. Poor documentation may leave consultants, contractors and your own staff with incomplete or incorrect information. Your firm must provide a framework and structure to this documentation process. Often, this includes providing required or suggested forms, checklists, project notebooks, etc.

These 10-keys to project management excellence should guide your everyday activities. You must continually strive to improve your performance for your own sake and that of your clients and other project team members.

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