

“Everyday projects“ lack support within their organisations

Getting on track with a calculated plan

Summary: Small- and medium-size projects often fail. They are expected to succeed without any attention or positive regard from management. There are no clear goals, realistic time lines, committed specialist and none of the necessary manoeuvring space needed by project managers. Kerstin Wünnecke explains, how project managers can deal with such adverse conditions and lead a smaller project across the finish line successfully.

With some envy the project manager observed his more successful colleagues: In his company the leaders of strategic development programmes received generous support: the best specialists in the organisation, well-filled coffers, and regular meetings with the executive team. In contrast managers of smaller projects had to fend for themselves. “For my small software project I had to do a lot of the programming myself and take overtime because I did not have access to the necessary internal specialists and no budget to hire freelance programmers”, the project manager complained. In the end his project was shut down. Because it was running out of time.

This is not a single incident. Big strategic projects – or flagship projects – are well run. But the lion share of small- and medium-size projects are left behind.

Many of these fail because they cannot meet their schedule or because of budget issues. Or because no one in senior management is really interested in them.

In addition small- and medium-sized projects are often underestimated. “Those supposedly simple run-of-the-mill projects just become more and more difficult”, says Kerstin Wünnecke, project management expert at next level consulting. Sometimes three or more departments are involved and this makes the management of such a project a demanding task.

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“In spite of these challenges many of these projects are treated as part of everyday work,” she reports – with all the problems this entails. For example these project managers lack the required decision making authority and a dedicated, well-functioning project team. The project mandate is often only fuzzy and states no clear goals. Time lines are not realistic and the budget is inadequate. All of this goes against the fundamentals of professional project management.

In the end the project manager of such a project will have to pay dearly for these deficiencies. “I know of desperate project managers who take care of project work themselves on the weekends. They just have too little support”, says Kerstin Wünnecke. Instead of this do-it-yourself-strategy she recommends to take another route: Namely to address the superior and the project sponsor and to speak of the difficulties, to list the consequences resulting from these difficulties and to offer solutions that decisions can be taken on immediately. “This way a project manager has a good chance of getting his project on the road to success”, she says.

For example the project mandate. A project has to kick off with a clear project mandate. What is the project meant to accomplish? What goals have to be reached? What exactly are the deliverables? Without a clear mandate, the project manager cannot plan his project. Where large-scale projects are concerned whole teams work together to determine goals and requirements, to develop quality measures and to negotiate all of this with the project sponsor. Smaller projects are often kicked-off based on a few key words, a note or an email. “For the project manager these vague frameworks are a huge problem,” explains Kerstin Wünnecke, “He can never be sure that he is on the right track.” What can be done? The expert’s advice is to not dive in on just good luck and a prayer.

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Instead the project manager should persevere and insist on a detailed description of the project's goals. As a second step he can determine what the project's goals mean: How can these goals be reached? How much time, budget and resources are needed? "Present your project sponsor with thought-through alternatives of how the project can be realised", recommends Kerstin Wünnecke. During these meetings often new and additional project requirements are identified. This in turn will change the original project plan. Again these changes will need to be planned and their impact on the schedule, resources and budget will have to be calculated - and again this project plan will have to be presented for approval.

Many project managers operate like a 'king without a country'. Project managers of flagship projects are often given a lot of rope. This is different for smaller projects. Their project managers run the project but important decisions are made exclusively by their superiors. This makes a project manager a king without a country. It can also jeopardise the project. For example decisions are left too long and are made too late. Or the superior sends a project in the wrong direction as he lacks a detailed understanding of the project. Or even worse: Several heads of departments want to be involved and they cannot come to an agreement. In this case Kerstin Wünnecke also recommends a strategy of assertive, straight-forward communication: Project managers need to clarify the consequences of such a setup. And then they should suggest other possible solutions for this difficulty. This expert speaks from experience when she says: "As a rule project managers of smaller projects don't have the same comprehensive decisions making powers as those of bigger projects." But still it is often possible to find a solution and define which responsibilities and competencies will be handed to the project manager and which stay with his superior. "In such a case it is determined exactly which

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decisions can be made by the project manager and which decisions will have to be left to his superior”, says Kerstin Wünnecke.

The workload problem: Many project managers of smaller and medium-size projects complain about a shortage of staff. The problem is not simply rooted in too few staff being allocated to the project. “The project managers often lack a strong network within their organisation”, says Kerstin Wünnecke, “That is why they don’t know of specialists in other departments, that they would need on their team.” Project managers land up doing the work their teams should be busy with. In the case of such a bottleneck the project manager should be ready with his facts and arguments: What is the impact of these lacking specialist skills on the project team and on the project’s schedule? How would the project profit from additional staff? How could additional staff be sourced – and what are the costs associated with that? “A well thought-through presentation can also help with these negotiations”, says Kerstin Wünnecke.

Please note that it is important that project managers pay attention to welding a real team – also for their small projects. Team members should not just feel responsible for a string of tasks but should feel co-responsible for the success of the project as a whole. This requires that staff is involved in the project from the very beginning. At a so-called “Kick-off Workshop” the project manager presents the objectives of the project. Then he plans the project in detail with his team. By involving each team member as early as that everyone understands the bigger picture of the project and his or her contribution becomes a puzzle piece within it. This allows each team member to grasp his tasks and responsibilities fully and to align himself with his colleagues.

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Dealing with changes in the right way: Hardly any project goes according to plan. The sponsor changes goals and makes new requests. Budgets are redistributed, team members leave the project and new goals are determined. Many project managers accept these changes on the spot – this is a big mistake! This makes you as the project manager responsible for keeping to the schedule, budget and goals in spite of the changes. Experts urge to neither fight the changes nor to bury the head in the sand. Instead calculate the consequences for the project these changes will bring with them: What will change with regard to the schedule, budget and the project deliverables? “Equipped with this analysis you can offer your project sponsor different alternatives on how the project’s desired outcomes can still be reached”, explains Kerstin Wünnecke, “Naturally the price tag for these changes needs to be included as well.”

However, most project managers of smaller projects shy away from such open and straight-forward conversations. Some even deem them unprofessional. A project manager is supposed to be a can-do person under all circumstances. This bias should best be set aside in the project management business. “After all, this is how project management professionals run their flagship projects,” says Kerstin Wünnecke.

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