

# **Realigning Project Objectives and Stakeholders' Expectations in a Project Behind Schedule**

**Thomas Juli, PhD**  
**Managing Director, Thomas Juli Empowerment Partners**

## **Abstract**

It is common knowledge that every project should have mutually agreed upon objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-boxed (SMART). Common knowledge does not automatically equal common practice. Often, projects fail simply because there is no mutual understanding of the objectives and stakeholder expectations are not aligned. This paper outlines a simple yet powerful workshop approach that can help realign objectives and stakeholders' expectations for a project that is behind schedule. It describes the prerequisites and necessary preparation, delineates the key parts of the workshop, and sketches possible outcomes.

## **Introduction**

In our hypothetical example, the project had a good start. The CEO and every department head agreed that it was time to replace the proprietary call center and promotion management applications with a new customer relationship management (CRM) system. The project was estimated to run for 9 months. The motivation of everyone involved was high and everyone was certain that this project would be a success. After all, it was not the first project of this size and complexity that the company managed successfully. However, today, 2 months later, initial enthusiasm has given way to cruel reality. During the first 2 months, the key requirements of the marketing department have been captured and documented. However, the call center and the billing departments have not concluded documenting their requirements due to different opinions about the scope and level of project involvement of their subject matter experts. Consequently, the project is behind schedule and not in budget.

The sponsor is not willing to accept this situation any longer. She replaces the part-time project manager with an external, full-time, and more experienced project manager who will report directly to her. The mission of the new project manager is clear: Do whatever is necessary to get the project back on track and finish it on time and in budget. Interviewing the department chairs, the new project manager quickly learns that expectations about the project differ greatly. There is anything but a common understanding of the project objective. The project manager decides to invite the sponsor and all stakeholders as well as the core project team to a mutual workshop. The question is, can this workshop become the foundation of success and, if so, how?

Does this sound like a familiar project situation? It is interesting and alarming that frequently projects fail simply because there is no mutual alignment of project objectives and stakeholder expectations. One thing is certain: There is no one recipe for success. On the other hand, there is a simple yet powerful solution to realign project objectives and stakeholders' expectations for a project that is behind schedule. This paper will:

- Outline this proven workshop approach
- Describe the prerequisites and necessary preparation
- Delineate the key parts of the workshop
- Sketch possible outcomes

## **The Workshop Preparation**

Experience shows that it is crucial that the project manager be endowed with the necessary support of the sponsor and senior management. In addition, the project manager needs to have a solid understanding of the company's organizational environment, its governance structures, and standard processes. In order to achieve this, the project manager in our scenario interviews all department chairs who have a stake in the project. While getting an idea about the stakeholders' expectations, the project manager introduced himself and gained the support for the upcoming workshop. All department chairs (i.e., marketing, customer care, call center, accounting/billing, IT), the

sponsor, and business and technical track leaders of the project team are invited to the workshop. The workshop is scheduled to run for 3 hours.

### **Set-up**

The morning of the workshop, the project manager introduces the objective of the workshop: Getting a mutual understanding of each other's expectations about the project, revisiting the official project objectives statement, and aligning it with (a) the present situation, and (b) the stated expectations of attendants. The expected outcome is a refined project objective statement: SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-boxed). This objective statement is mutually understood and supported.

The workshop is divided into three distinct parts. Following the introduction, the desired group of 20 people (two track leads of the project team plus two to three representatives each of marketing, customer care, call center, accounting, and IT) will be split into five groups of two to three individuals each. They meet in parallel breakout sessions of 30 to 45 minutes to discuss and summarize their needs and their expectations of the project and its deliverables. A prepared set of questions serves as a guideline to this fact-finding session. Following the breakout session, each group presents the documented responses to the attendees and answers any questions about the presented results. During the second part of the workshop, participants prioritize the presented results of the group sessions based on the SMART and other predefined prioritization criteria. The aim is to qualify the existing project objective to better align with stakeholders' expectations and meet previously set criteria. A review of remaining open questions and an outlook of the next steps conclude the workshop.

Everyone agrees with the agenda of the workshop. The groups split up and start work.

### **Breakouts**

Each group is made up of representatives of the various departments involved in the project. They all have in common the decision making authority. This is important, because otherwise the workshop results may have to go through yet another round of management approval, which could prove time consuming and detrimental to the achieved consensus of the workshop, calling into question the overall purpose of the workshop in the first place.

At the beginning of the breakout session, each group is given a set of questions. The goal is to guide the group discussion towards tangible results, which later will be shared with the other groups. In our example, the groups are asked to answer the following questions:

**Purpose:** Why do you and your organization need a new CRM system? List the most important reasons.

**Value:** On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being highest), what level of priority does a new CRM system have for you and your organization?

**Other projects:** What other project(s) is (are) more important to you and why? On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being highest), what level of priority does each have? (Please list up to three other projects.)

**Impact of delay:** What impact would it have on you and your organization if the project were delayed and/or does not meet your expectations (e.g., limited scope)? How do you measure (i.e., quantify) this impact? List the three most important impacts and quantify them.

**Fallback plan:** Do you have a fallback plan/solution in place? How much would it cost? Limit your response to three options and quantify them.

**SMART project objective(s):** Based on your answers above, phrase the project objective(s), making sure that it is (a) specific, (b) measurable, (c) achievable, (d) relevant, and (e) time-boxed.

**Critical success factors:** What are the top three most important factors that have to be met for a project to be successful?

The questions address the group's present understanding and evaluation of the project, their expectations, and their definition of the project objective. Each answer is printed on a separate moderation card (e.g., 4 × 5 inch card).

Following the 30- to 45-minute breakout session, each group presents its responses to the whole group. Each response card is pinned onto a white board or wall with the various categories (e.g., purpose, value, other projects) at the top. Presentation time including Q&A is limited to 10 minutes. A short break of 15 minutes gives everyone a chance to read the various responses once more. This concludes the first part of the workshop.

## **Prioritization**

After the break, the whole group meets to prioritize the collected input. To meet this purpose, every attendant has three votes for various categories. The votes can be split evenly or allocated to one or more entries. Although every category is important, the project manager asks the attendants to cast their votes first for the categories *Purpose*, *Other Projects*, and *Impact of Delay*. The top two entries of each category that receive the most votes are discussed in the group. The objective is to agree on a single entry and phrase that everyone or at least the majority can support. The project manager facilitates this exercise. In case of a tie, it is the sponsor who has the last word.

To a certain extent, this voting exercise can be tricky. It can be argued that one department should have more votes than another. On the other hand, giving each department the same number of votes yields a more realistic picture of the overall perspective of all stakeholders involved. Accounting for all involved is a critical success factor in defining a foundation of mutual agreement and support. We need to get the project back on track.

Based on the result of the first voting exercise, the group now casts their votes on the collected *SMART Project Objectives*. In case submitted objective statements do not meet the SMART criteria, the project manager helps qualify and rephrase the statements until they do. As in the first voting round, the two statements with the most votes are discussed with the whole group. The project manager facilitates this discussion. Again the idea is to come up with a definition of SMART project objective(s) that enjoy the support of all attendants. Once more, in the event of a tie or deadlock the sponsor casts the final vote.

Keeping the results of the first and second voting rounds in mind, the group continues to cast their votes on the *Critical Success Factors*. This time, the top three factors that receive the most votes are discussed in the group. They will be accounted for in future requirements gathering and evaluation, project planning, executing, monitoring, and closing of the project. As an alternative to the breakout session, the question about *Critical Success Factors* can be addressed in the whole group following the first two voting rounds.

Last but not least, the project manager summarizes the prioritized project objectives and stakeholders' expectations. Any open issues and/or action items are captured, owners assigned, and solution dates agreed. The next concrete step(s) depend(s) to a great extent on the actual outcomes of the prioritization exercise. This could be revisited to establish functional and nonfunctional requirements, review the project governance structure, and, most importantly, adjust the project plan to meet the qualified and realigned project objectives and stakeholders' expectations. As such, the workshop serves as a starting point to get the project back on track.

## **Workshop Outcomes**

The workshop results in a common definition and understanding of the project objectives. This builds a foundation for all consecutive project work. It also serves as a prioritization guideline for any remaining requirements gathering and evaluation as well as for project planning, executing, monitoring, and closing activities. At the same time, the workshop brings the key stakeholders together. It thus serves as a simple and effective team-building exercise. It constructs a learning environment that promotes a better understanding of the expectations of the other departments and individuals without constraints and assumptions.

We must not jump to the conclusion that the workshop itself and its outcomes are sufficient to realign the project objectives and stakeholders' expectations. They are not. Instead, they help build a solid foundation to get the project back on track. The list of open issues and action items collected during the workshop indicate that the workshop is a mere starting point, albeit a good one. It is now up to the project manager to bring the project to a successful finish with the help of everyone involved.

## **Lessons Learned From Other Workshops**

Having conducted similar workshops for numerous projects, the author testifies that such workshops were critical in realigning project objectives and stakeholders' expectations. Every project is different and unique. Although the project scenario and workshop described in this paper and workshop may not be applied to others in a 1:1 fashion, the general idea certainly is. Experience shows that this workshop should be scheduled to run at least 2 to 3 hours. Depending on the complexity of the project and number of stakeholders involved, more time may be necessary. The

numbers of attendees should be limited to 20, giving enough room for effective and results-driven facilitation while staying within the time limit. All key stakeholders shall be invited to attend. It is crucial that all attendees should be decision making authorities. The project manager needs to be an experienced facilitator. In addition, it is recommended that the project manager interview the stakeholders before the workshop; although this is not absolutely necessary, it helps build a level of trust in the project manager. Because every project is different, every workshop has its own dynamics. The project manager can control these dynamics to a certain extent by thorough preparation and team support.

### **The Simulation Exercise at the PMI Global Congress North America**

Given the time constraints of the session, the simulation will focus on demonstrating the viability of the described workshop approach. Attendees will be provided with background information about a sample project as well as with the questionnaire for the breakouts, which will be limited to 10 minutes. All attendees will be expected to actively participate and interact in a structured and guided environment. After the simulation exercise, the author will cite examples of workshops that followed the demonstrated guidelines. A Q&A session concludes the simulation session.