

An Everyday Definition of Project Management

The alarm is blaring and you have already hit “snooze” about four times. You can’t believe that you overslept again. It is 6:30am and you have to make sure that both kids get showered, dressed, fed and to the bus stop by 7:15am or else you will have to make the traffic laden drive to school and risk being late to the office. In the back of your mind you quickly calculate how long each activity will take. You realize that if the youngest waits for her older brother to finish showering there is no way they will both make it to the bus stop. So you tell her to go ahead and use your shower this morning. Even though you know that she will probably waste a little of your expensive shampoo, it is worth the couple of dollars to make sure that you don’t have to play school bus this morning.

Everyone is finally dressed and fed and on their way to the bus stop at 7:05am. They actually have five minutes to spare. You are pleased with yourself as you still can’t believe that they actually made it out the door early. However, you do not have time to dwell on your accomplishment because you must go about your business so that you can get to the office on time.

As a Project Management Consultant I am constantly asked what it is that I do. I guess for the average person that job title/description conjures up images of defense contractors and space launch activities. However, the hero of the story above is not just an average Mom; she is a successful project manager. The difference between how she and I execute and follow-up on our tasks is what sets us apart.

Having a behind schedule project is not that uncommon of an occurrence. What is uncommon is bringing a behind schedule project in on schedule. As a matter of fact, the U.S. Government commissioned a study that found out that over 75% of all projects end up behind schedule and over cost. Although this is a common occurrence, there is no

reason that it must be accepted. Granted, sometimes things happen that are out of anyone's control (like a hurricane destroying a finished goods inventory warehouse) but a good project manager can almost always find some alternative in order to minimize the negative impacts.

Our hero Mom did exactly what a good project manager would do without even realizing it. She identified two tasks that could be performed concurrently (both kids showering at the same time). There were advantages and disadvantages and she weighed the risk and rewards and made a decision. It cost her a few dollars, but in the long run those few dollars are probably more than offset by the gas money she would have burned.

As a project manager, mom would have written down in her little book of tips and tricks that sharing her shower is a surefire way to make-up a little time in the morning. However, the wasted shampoo will eventually add up to a significant sum and therefore this process cannot be implemented as routine. It still makes more sense to wake everyone up at 6:00am so they can go about their normal routines for getting ready and to the bus stop on-time.

A good project manager always has two or three "Plan B's" in their little book of tips and tricks. They constantly are playing the "What If" game so they can try to predict all of the potential negative actions that might slow the progress of their team. As they make those predictions they try to figure out how they can mitigate the impact. One problem might require having extra metal stock inventory on hand in case the delivery truck gets a flat tire and is a few hours late getting to the assembly plant. Or, in Mom's case, she could keep an extra bottle of cheap shampoo handy just in case she sleeps through her alarm again. Usually there are a few little activities that can mitigate a large number of potentially huge problems. It is the project manager's responsibility to identify those activities and make sure they are available 'just in case'.

Not every behind schedule project can be recovered. Sometimes the schedule has to be extended because things have just gotten too far off track. At this point it is the project manager's job to perform post-mortem activities so they can develop 'early identifiers' for the completion of the current project and for future projects. Perhaps Mom was too enraptured by a new book so she did not turn out the light until 3:00am. Well, in her book of tips and tricks she should write down not to start a new book on a school/work night. For the project manager he might want to write down that he needs to keep an extra day of metal stock inventory available because the delivery truck is not reliable enough. He might even want to talk to his metal stock supplier to ask them if they can do anything to increase the reliability of their deliveries. Perhaps he will contact a different vendor to see what their policy and track record is for on-time deliveries. A good project manager always has something up his sleeve for all but the most unpredictable anomalies.

In order to recover from a behind schedule scenario like Mom was able to do, a project manager must constantly be evaluating tasks and methods for accomplishing those tasks. In the example above a project manager would have asked if the kids needed to perform all of the activities that were listed. Could they go without a shower for one day? Could they not dress or eat? These may sound like nonsensical questions, but if push came to shove a granola bar on the walk to the bus stop might have been an acceptable one-time substitute. Maybe instead of junior wearing a three-piece suit that takes him ten minutes to put on, this time a t-shirt and shorts would have been acceptable. A good project manager questions everything to make sure that it is relevant and beneficial to the project.

One of the most important activities a project manager can do is to write down what worked well and what did not work at all. If mom gets a call at work from the school saying that the dress code does not allow for t-shirt and shorts, well, that one goes on the side of the book about things not to ever do again. If the kids get home and talk about how that granola bar was a really good breakfast, then maybe that deserves another try, or at least a little research to make sure that it is a good source of vitamins for the day.

Sometimes a project manager will try something that ends up being a complete and utter mistake. What would be a bigger mistake is if that project manager did not both write it down for future reference and share his experience with his colleagues so they do not also make the same mistake. A good project manager is always communicating with their team and colleagues so they can share and gain important information to enhance the effectiveness of the team.

Overall, a project manager is responsible for applying sound execution techniques to any activity. Whether a project is two months or two years, good planning and execution strategy must be implemented. A really good project manager knows how to balance the process of developing strategy and implementing execution techniques so the project manager does not lose sight of the ultimate goal...

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