

8 Challenges of a Project

I have to admit it. Project Management is one of my passions. I love the many facets of the role. It is exciting to see project teams come together and a project start to take life, but there are also many challenges and hurdles to overcome. When I get the opportunity, I like to speak from the perspective of lessons learned. I know that I will always be able to improve upon my skills, but it has also given me the ability to see a common thread through all the projects I have led. There are 8 common challenges that any project may face.

Incomplete Communication – This is a very large and very broad topic, so let me start by breaking it down. Communication must occur between two or more people. The cycle of communication is one person must give the communication and one



person must receive it. I have never seen the lack of communication in a project or organization. However, I have seen where the communication is incomplete in one way or another. Perhaps, one person is communicating, but the other person is not receiving it because they do not understand what is being stated. There is the scenario where one person is not listening or is distracted and quickly forgets. Then we have one of my favorite scenarios, where one person is in need of communication,

but does not tell anyone or ask. We can also think of those experiences where communication went to only one level of the organization versus all levels. We can continue on with the times when one person receives the communication but does not pass it on when appropriate. It is not the lack of communication because the cycle has begun. It is that the cycle of communication is incomplete.

Understanding the difference is the key to help alleviating it. Resolving the issue involves "Closed Loop Communication". Do any of you remember this? I don't remember where I learned this, so I can't give credit where credit is due. I can't take credit for it either. Closed loop communication is making sure the cycle of communication has occurred. It is NOT enough that you give communication. You must verify that the person received your communication, understood the communication and acted appropriately to the communication. There are four things you will want to ask the person receiving the communication. 1) Can you repeat back to me what you think I communicated? 2) Do you have any questions about this communication? 3) How does this communication impact you? And as a follow up question 4) Have you acted upon the communication that you received? The final step to this process is to verify that the actions have happened. If not, then you go back to the person with facts and focus on the complete cycle of communication not the person. No organization or person will ever communicate 100% perfectly. However, understanding the broken cycle of communication and bringing it to full cycle will definitely make a big impact on your project.

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Lack of Sponsorship – Webster’s Dictionary defines Sponsor as “one who assumes responsibility for some other person or thing”. Sponsorship is very much like the captain who steers the ship. It should be the person who has the most at stake for the impact of the project. Sponsorship should never be the CIO or the Project Manager (unless it is a project that only affects IT). Sponsorship does not have to be one single person, but can be a committee with a dedicated chair-person. What are the symptoms when sponsorship is lacking. 1) There is no chain of authority. 2) There are no defined project goals. 3) No one is making the final decision when committees do not come to a consensus. 4) Sub-committees or Individuals have no accountability. 5) Mile stones and time lines are fluid. If you are experiencing just one of these, you may not be dealing with a lack of sponsorship. However, if you are seeing two or more of these then you need to analyze the project to determine if this is occurring. It is possible you have a sponsor that does not understand their role. If you are looking at a project, and there is no one assigned, you need to go to your CIO. This will need to be discussed at the executive level.



Bigger Than Life – If you have managed a project, you will be able to relate to this one very quickly. As a project is beginning to get momentum, people get excited about how this piece of technology is going to change their life. It is at this time in the project when the long awaited solution has finally arrived. However, expectation begins to surpass reality. Panic sets in when you hear a director casually state in a meeting, “Don’t worry about that. When such-and-such a project is finish that will all be taken care of.” Your project quickly becomes the magic fairy dust that will soon resolve all the problems of the organization. I know some of you are smiling as you read this. However, it is a serious issue when it occurs. The expectation crashes when the project



becomes reality at implementation. Disapproval soars when all the problems are not solved. How do you overcome this? Make sure you have clearly defined project goals and if you have time, do an impact analysis. Be ready to clarify at any given time any misconceptions. However, you cannot be confrontational or combative. Never argue in a public setting.

You have to be calm, respectful and diplomatic when approaching it. Consider starting the conversation with something like, “Can you help me understand how the project will include this issue? It is my understanding that we will impact A, B, and C, but I may not see what you are seeing.” If it is a member of Executive Leadership, wait until you have a private meeting. If you don’t, this could be fatal to your career and the project.

Taking It Personally – When you are in the midst of a project, you want to do your very best to try and lead the organization onto a better way. You are focused on the

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benefit of the organization. However, there will be some project members that are more focused on the negative. Their reasons could be due to change or it could be the system they wanted was not chosen. Perhaps, it is functionality that is no longer available in the new software, or they really like the old system. Regardless, there is a sense of loss to them. Many people can be won over with some resilience and knowledge, some can't. You represent the project to them and they may voice their frustration towards you. If you take every comment to heart or take it personally, you will lose your objectivity. You react more out of emotion which can lead to more of a combative environment. A good project leader has the ability to see these comments/actions as they are. Most often, it has nothing to do with you. It is them acting out their loss or frustration. When you realize it has nothing to do with you, then are able to help them move past it all.

Indifference – Let's go to Webster's on this one. Indifference comes from the word indifferent. It is defined as "of no importance or value one way or the other". I always think of indifference as a cancer. It starts out small and undetected. If it goes unnoticed, it can grow at rapid rates until it is too late. Often this is a culture that has developed, and is very difficult to resolve. It can occur very often when accountability is lacking. When a person is indifferent, they could care less if a project is successful or a failure. There is no motivation for them to participate. There are two things that I try to do to defeat indifference. The first thing is to try and find a motivation. Most people can be motivated one way or the other. Once you find it, try to bring that aspect into the project. When approaching the person, always introduce the motivation into the conversation. You will have to do this repeatedly throughout the project. If the person does not have a motivation, then try to minimize the impact. Yes, there are people that cannot be motivated within reason. I have personally witness it, and the only thing you can do is to isolate or minimize the impact. This person should be on as few of committees as possible. If information is needed from the individual, do it one on one. Once you have the information, verify all facts and collaborate their answers.

Silo Effect – I don't know if your hospital is like some of the ones I have work for, but have you ever noticed that ED Transfers to the Inpatient Units never happen smoothly. That is until Joint Commission walks in the door. This phenomenon has always baffled me. Healthcare is notoriously known for its silo effect. They are large organizations with many departments that must act and function independently. Unfortunately, this helps creates the silo effect. How can you break through the silos and bring everyone into a sense of unity. There is one common denominator that all these departments have in common, the patient. I have never met anyone working in healthcare that did not understand the importance of the patient. It is the sole purpose that hospitals exist. It is the sole purpose why you are implementing your project in one way or another. Always bring the participants to a



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patient focus. Ask questions like, How does this affect our patients? Or, how can we better transfer the patient from one department to another. Perhaps, you can ask, how can we better improve the care of our patients? Most individuals are willing to step out of their silo for the betterment of the patient.

End of the World – there is something within the human soul that feels compelled to explain their perspective on how the world is coming to an end. Perhaps, it is the basic instinct of survival that if I tell you how everything is failing, then you can't blame me. These are the people that declare how nothing is going to work on the day of



implementation. The organization is going to come to a screeching halt when the project is implemented. Most of their concerns are based upon unsubstantiated fears. There are times when they are correct so, let me step back for just a moment. You should never ignore these people. Let me repeat that again, you should never ignore these people. The best way that I have learned how to deal with these situations is to validate or disprove their claim. Get a detail list of what is not working. With them present, run through testing scenarios. If they are validated, then you just avoided problems at go live. If the concerns are disproved, then they have seen it with their own eyes. I wish I could tell you that this just took one time to fix. It usually takes several times. The list usually changes, but the resolution is the same.

Us versus Them – I will never forget one project in the beginning of my career. I was working in a large healthcare organization in Los Angeles, and we were in the process of installing Epic. I was caught between two warring Vice Presidents and so was the project. It was a nightmare to say the least. The project was not about improving care. It was more about who had the most influence in the organization. It was us versus them atmosphere and very combative. It didn't end until one of the Vice Presidents was let go. Let me share some of the lessons that I learned. First, there are some things you will need to do not because it is correct or to improve care, it is for political reasons only. You will always want to document in writing these types of decisions. The second thing I learned was never treat the other side as the enemy regardless how you are treated. The third lesson learned is try to do as much with the detail people as possible in work sessions. This can be a slippery slope that needs to handle diplomatically. Usually both sides realize the politics involved. The political pull is felt greater the higher up you go on the org chart to the warring factions. The last lesson learned is always be ready to offer the olive branch. This action will go a long way.

I can't say these will be the only 8 challenges you will face, but they will be the most common ones. Keeping an eye out for them will assist you in managing your project more effectively and it will help you from getting burned out. Hopefully, you can avoid

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some of my lessons learned.

D288 IT Solutions, LLC was founded by Kevin L. Frederick in 2009, a former Vice President and CIO of a health system, who was always in search of a company that could assist him in seeing the "big picture" and help him achieve it in a practical approach. With 26 years of experience in Healthcare Information Technology, Kevin brings together a broad range of experience from technology, application and telecommunications to readiness assessment, project management and systems integration.

The goal of D288 IT Solutions, LLC is to support the IT advances of hospitals and healthcare. To come along side and assist with their strategic vision and objectives.

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