

Project Charter Tossing Gasoline on Smoldering Problems



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Chartering a project is a process of surfacing the problems and conflicts that could disrupt your project and resolving them before you begin to execute.

Problems arising from the charter components of PM authority, change control and risk mitigation cripple many projects before they start. In project-based organizations, these components are successfully addressed in Enterprise PM protocols. Other organizations cover them in client contracts or as part of a Statement of Work (SOW), scope definition or even a requirements document. Our point here is not format, but the need to cover these issues before we get into detailed planning, much less starting work.

Typical Charter Communications

Let's listen in on a typical session where a project manager reviews the charter components with project executives. We'll not only hear the words they say but we'll learn what they're really thinking.

PM Authority

Project Manager's thoughts: *I don't want a repeat of that last project where most of the team ignored their assignments unless I spent 50 hours each week begging and pleading with them to get their tasks done. Because this is a tough project, I may need executive support when there are problems. On my last project, I was the executives' "best buddy" until we started work, then they never returned my calls.*

Project Manager's words: "I will need the authority to coordinate the activities of the entire project team and integrate their efforts so that we can achieve outstanding results. This authority must cross functional and departmental lines because the project does. The other part of the project authority is defining your role in providing support for the project and assisting in the problem solving and change control process."

Project Executives' thoughts: *This power mad techno-geek must really think that the line managers in our organization will allow an outsider to destroy the*



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management hierarchy by assigning work to their people. And there's no way I want an endless string of escalations landing on my desk, nor will I listen to the PM's whining every time a cloud appears on the horizon.

Project Executive's words: "Of course, you have my full support. My door will always be open if you have any problems getting things done. Now, exactly when are we going to finish and what will this cost?"

Risks and Assumptions

Project Manager's thoughts: *I was up half the night thinking through everything that could possibly go wrong with this project and I think I got them all listed. If any of those things happen, they can't blame me.*

Project Manager's words: "I'm sure you've carefully read pages 46 to 77 of the project documentation where I have detailed the assumptions we've made in planning the project and the risks the project faces. These are challenges that we all must work together to resolve."

Project Executive's thoughts: *Oh sure, I'm going to spent hours reading all those excuses and complaints. If this project finishes one day later than planned we'll hang this project manager from the flagpole, no matter how many excuses are listed.*

Project Executives words: "That's a very careful assessment of the risks. You certainly seem to have this project plan well thought out."

Change Control

Project Manager's thoughts: *These decision-makers and their subordinates have to realize that they can't make changes willy-nilly to this project plan every week. That's why we never finish on time and that's why no one's ever happy with project results.*

Project Manager's words: "We need to freeze the project plan that you've approved today because we all realize the devastating effect that changes have on our ability to finish on time and within budget."

Project Executives' thoughts: *The world is not going to stand still while this clown works on this project. Our environment is continually changing so we have to be flexible and react to those changes. I'm not going to fall for this change control game which is nothing but an excuse for this project manager to demand more resources and budget every time I turn around.*

Project Executives words "Well, there is a need for flexibility but I certainly agree that we want to keep this project on course."

Get the Gasoline Ready

Now we have a project that is ripe for failure. Neither the project manager nor the decision makers are wrong in what they're thinking. But the project manager's technique in communicating the charter elements is abysmal. The PM presented the executives with a lot of words but no information for decision-making. As a result, the project manager has left the smoldering embers of project failure untouched; for now

that is. But the embers of problems with authority, unmitigated risks and vague change control are ready to burst into flame in mid-project, when they will do the most harm.

When we communicate these charter elements, our intent is not to cause conflict or problems but rather to surface any that exist before we start work. We want to throw the gasoline now on any burning embers.

Project Manager Authority

To describe the authority they need, project managers often use mealy-mouthed words like, "Full management authority", "Coordinate the activities of all project team members" or "Have management responsibility for...." These phrases are meaningless, even the most feudal of "silo" managers can agree to them even when they have no intention of allowing the project manager to interfere with the existing superior-subordinate relationships. Experienced project managers know that it is exceedingly difficult to make work assignments when each of them has to trickle through a rigid management hierarchy. The result? Your project team members work on project tasks only when their "real boss" can't think of anything else for them to do.

Any project that seeks to produce significant value for the organization reaches across functional or organizational lines. If we wish to have any chance of success, we need to be successful in assigning work across those boundaries. The issue is as important for a consultant managing a project for a client, as it is for an internal project manager directing a project for a user organization.

If we're going to have problems making matrix-type assignments across boundaries, it's best to find out about them before we start work. Then we can resolve them when the discussion is at the level of project management principles. If we wait to discuss authority until we have a problem with one of our team members doing their assignment, then the discussion is not about principles, it's about personalities, priorities and politics.

So we communicate authority in our charter with words like, "This project requires two hours a day from each of your first-line supervisors. As project manager, I will "own" those two hours every day and be able to directly assign work to those people during that two-hour period without having those assignments approved by the supervisor's superior."

Are those words likely to enflame any issues which exist about cross-functional or matrix to authority? Yes they are and that's the point. By being very direct and even a little bit pushy about the kind of authority we need to get the project done, we enflame the issue early, giving ourselves the opportunity to resolve it. We want to resolve it before work starts because that is when executive decision-makers are most engaged with the project and when their concerns about budget and completion date are at the forefront. That's the best time to make the case for "carving out" special project management authorities that reach across functional lines. We can present the benefits and efficiency of these special authorities as well as describe the delays

and postponements that will result if we don't have the ability to make assignments effectively.

With that said, we also need to be wise about what we request. There are many levels and flavors of cross-functional authority. We "pick our shots" by asking for higher levels of cross-functional authority on critical path assignments and other assignments that pose significant threats to the project completion date or budget. We don't ask for high-level authority for every "borrowed" team member.

Project Risks & Assumptions

We also throw gasoline on project risks and assumptions by being equally direct about them. Remember that identifying every possible risk and assumption does not insulate the project manager from blame. The fact that a PM listed 157 bad things that might happen has never in the history of project management protected a PM from being blamed for a failed project. For consultants, listing all the risks may prevent you from being sued but it does not yield a satisfied client.

Rather than list everything we can think of and have no one read it, we identify a very limited number of significant risks and assumptions. Then we engage the executives in a discussion of the likelihood and severity of those risks and ways to mitigate them. The executives can then make a decision about what risks they want to run and what risks they want to try and mitigate either in the project plan or through their own actions.

As an example, rather than list dozens of pointless risks/assumptions like "Every team member will do their assignments on time...", "Everyone will turn in their time sheet every week" and "Everyone will treat everybody else with respect," we focus on big issues. We might identify a few risks like, "Ace Consulting has a long-term contract for services based on charging hourly rates and a history of budget overruns and delays which could cripple this project and cause us to finish months later than planned." After throwing that gasoline on the embers, we might offer mitigation strategies of using another consulting firm or asking for authority to negotiate an incentive/penalty-based contract. Once again, the direct approach seems a little pushy but is usually preferable to suffering problems with this "politically connected" vendor after they cause delays in the project.

Change Control Rules & Process

The last fire we want to enflame is change control. Project managers who leave change control as an informal, casual process rarely have consistent success. They and their team members are routinely caught between wanting a satisfied client/user and containing the scope of the project.

Another reason for a very formal and pre-specified change control process is to avoid deluging executives with a flood of "escalations." In some organizations, escalating project problems to senior management is a disease that has grown to plague-like proportions. One of the cures is very precise rules about who can approve what kind of changes to the project plan. We might ask for project manager authority to approve

changes that have an impact of less than three days on the project duration and \$5,000 on the budget. By being direct once again we throw gasoline on the fire and give the executives the opportunity to select the magnitude of the changes they want to approve.

Summary

To learn more about implementing these charter elements in your organizational protocol for project management or to learn techniques for implementing them on your projects, visit our Project Management Bookstore or Distance Learning Center. Our Project Management KnowledgeBase also contains additional information on handling these project management challenges.