

# Project Charter Solving Problems Early



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**Chartering a project surfaces problems and conflicts early so they can be resolved before the project work starts.**

When problems arise at mid-project, the impact is twice as severe as it would have been if we dealt with them early. The charter is not just paperwork. It a chance to avoid common problems that arise from:

- Inadequate PM authority
- Unclear change control processes
- Resources that don't show up for project work
- Risks we did nothing to prevent.

Besides a few sheets of paper, all we need is an understanding that early in a project is the best time to solve problems. Then we have the sponsor's and stakeholders' attention and everyone is focused on project success. Three weeks later, they'll all be onto something else.

## Typical Charter Presentation

Let's listen in on a typical session where a project manager reviews the charter components with the project executives. We'll not only hear the words they say but we'll also 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 hours each week begging and pleading with them to get their tasks done. This project's bigger and I may need executive support when there are problems.*

**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 processes."

**Project Executives' 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 charter where I 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 Executives' words:** "That's a very careful assessment of the risks. You certainly seem to have this project plan well thought out. I am in your corner."

## Change Control

**Project Manager's thoughts:** *These executives have to realize that they can't make changes to the 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' words:** "Well, there is a need for flexibility but I certainly agree that we want to keep this project on course."

## The PM Has Not Avoided Any Problems

Now we have a project that is ripe for failure. The project manager's technique let everyone gloss over the problems and not deal with them early. The PM did not force the executive to make decisions. So the issues of PM authority, risk management and change control were left to smolder; for now. But the embers of those will burst into flames in mid-project, when they will do the most harm.

Instead, we want to surface any issues now about borrowing people across functional lines, risks and change control before we start work. Let's see how we **should** do it.

## Project Manager Authority

If we're going to have problems making 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 not 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:

**Project Manager's words:** "This project requires two hours a day from each of the following first-line supervisors (List of specific names and titles). As project manager, I will "own" those two hours every day and be able to directly assign work from the approved project plan and schedule to those people during that two-hour period."

Are those words likely to inflame any issues which exist about cross-functional or matrix authority? Yes they are and that's the point. By being very direct and crystal clear about the

kind of authority we need to get the project done, we inflame the issues early, giving ourselves the opportunity to resolve them. We want to resolve them before work starts because that's 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 risks to the project completion date or budget. We don't ask for high-level authority over every "borrowed" team member.

## Project Risks & Assumptions

We also throw gasoline on project risks and assumptions by being equally direct about them. 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.

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 the following:

**Project Manager's Words** "Ace Consulting has a long-term contract for services based on charging hourly rates. They have 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 may seem a little pushy but it's 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 inflame 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 like this:

**Project Manager's Words:** "As the PM, I am authorized to approve changes that have an impact of less than three days on the project duration and \$5,000 on the budget. In aggregate I can approve not more than an additional \$15,000 in cost and 10 days in duration.

By being direct, we once again solve potential problems early by giving the executives the opportunity to select the magnitude of the changes they want to approve.

## Summary

To learn more about implementing these charter elements, take a look at our 1-to-1 web-based training for individuals and our in-person seminars for organizations.