

Karen's Top Five Project Management Tips

1. Resist the urge to produce something, anything before the team understands the goals of the project.

At the beginning of every project, there is pressure to show something, anything to prove there is movement. The pressure can be subtly cultural or overt and obnoxious, as in “So what has your team actually been doing??!!” The best project managers push back against creating any work product until the goals and objectives of the project are well understood. I’m not suggesting waiting months to show progress, but taking an extra few days or weeks at the very beginning to set a proper direction is always time well spent. Project managers have a responsibility to their teams to shelter them and to seek the answers required to move forward.

2. Invest more time in the people than in the process.

Inexperienced project managers, plus some who should know better, may be tempted to over-engineer the project processes, especially concerning schedules, risk management, change management, and project reporting. Instead of creating unnecessarily complex processes, the smart project manager spends time wandering around, virtually or in-person, talking to every single person involved in the project, at every level of the project organizational structure. The more time the project manager learns what concerns people have, what motivates them, and what they are looking for to feel they are connected to a well-managed project, the more smoothly the project will run. Guaranteed.

3. Think in terms of slides and schedules, not in terms of meetings and milestones.

Too many project managers hold too many meetings, and get worried and frustrated around specific project milestones. While clearly the project manager is responsible for hitting deliverables at specific milestones, the details of the private schedule the project manager keeps should indicate what specific issues to be focused on with specific people at specific times. I’ve found that a few slides showing what has been accomplished to date, what percentage complete the project is, what the next series of deliverables need to be, and what are specific helpful tasks the steering committee can perform are all that need to be communicated most of the time. Long meetings to hash over every small detail are usually counterproductive.

4. Backtracking is better than a Band-Aid.

Slapping Band-Aid fixes on a failing project might seem like the right thing to do in order to keep the project moving forward and to hit deadlines. However, I've learned that sometimes the hardest, but most courageous thing to do is to cancel or defer a failing project. Backtracking to the point where things started to go off the rails, filling in the information or staffing gaps, and then restarting properly again will almost always save significant time and money in the end. Usually this is a very hard sell to stakeholder groups, and project managers need to be very brave to speak up in this regard. But remember, if you believe this is the right course of action, then you have an ethical obligation to recommend it.

5. The most powerful question is "what can you do?"

At almost every stage, in every project, you will find individual workers telling you that they cannot complete a task. Sometimes it's because of an incorrect time / effort estimate, sometimes because the requirements keep changing, sometimes because it's simply proving harder than first thought. The best project managers accept this information, ask clarifying questions, and support the frazzled worker who is having to confess to letting the team down. And then ask the most powerful question: What Can You Do? If the full functionality can't be completed, what can be? If the test results won't all be available, what ones will be? It's amazing how far you can move a project forward simply by asking what might be possible. Note that for this technique to work, the question must be asked thoughtfully, kindly, and in a supportive, intellectually questioning manner. If you ask it in a disparaging or challenging way, the answer will be given grudgingly, without full commitment to actually complete what is proposed. Try asking, and see what results you get!

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About the Author



Karen Creditor has practical experience as a project management executive who has lead project management offices and successfully managed million dollar technical programs for enterprise level companies, including Monsanto, Peabody Energy, Research in Motion, and Marsh Company.

Karen also is an inspiring teacher, passionate about applying new learning to achieve business and personal success. She has taught in the Applied Science and Engineering Programs at Washington University in St. Louis and Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning in the Department of Business.

Let us know what you think:

- What are your top five project management tips? Please share them.