

Managing for a Successful Project Closure

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Abstract—Professionally approached managers and their teams, with all relevant abilities supported by efficient and accurate tracking software manage to plan, initiate & execute projects successfully. So why do these management teams often fail to deliver the project in its final closure phase?

Problems such as budget constraints, timely milestone achievement, resource shortage or even lack of interest from the team, all come in existence during this phase. This may be experienced by most project managers looking forward to a project completion. A winning project may be described as the one that has effectively been closed, because project closure in itself is one whole project with individual tasks and assigned resources.

This paper achieves in providing guidelines for managers who, by implementing centralized ownership (involving all team members), 'post-closure' communication with all stakeholders, regular updates on execution of remaining processes, resource allocation and most importantly, by triggering positive psychological behavior of team members will ensure a successful closure.

These guidelines may also be utilized for propagation of positive feedback from stakeholders in order to maximize a successful closure and significantly enhance the chances of an overall triumphant project completion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teams and their leaders drive a project towards its success or failure. Many internal & external factors are involved. Such as administrative, contractual, team behavioral aspects, communication, budget, etc. Just as everything in this world living or not has a start and an end, therefore a project started should be closed with the same enthusiasm. As a project is planned, scheduled and implemented with motivation while requiring a targeted team, similarly the closing phase also requires commitment and interest. Closure should not be dealt with ease.

Closure of a project or phase must be 'formalized' for proper acceptance, so as to be brought to an orderly end [3], irrespective of the projects success or failure. This paper researched for the Telecom Industry of Islamabad would discuss the proper closure of a project by assisting in understanding team behavior and communication techniques before and at closure along with the importance and creation of a closure schedule.

II. REFRAINING FROM PROJECT CLOSURE

Closing and finalizing is the last stage of a project cycle. It is a stage that is not practiced regularly in most matrix organizations for the respective industry. These organizations

refrain from closure activities more or less due to the following reasons:

Companies keep resources limited as not to exceed in project costs. At near completion of a project most of these resources are allocated to a newly acquired project.

A new team is allocated for project closure without any prior experience or knowledge on the project implementation. These teams often fail to successfully close the project (prior knowledge is vital for project closure).

They do not consider closure vital for a projects completion. They remain more focused on the implementation.

- Delayed projects result in lack of interest in closure activities.
- Delay in project closure communiqués.
- Major variances in implementation hinder the contractual closure activities within stakeholders.

As the implementation and success or failure of a project is owned by the project team as a whole and not just by the managers or the planners, therefore ownership for closure should also be centralized. Closure is itself a project and requires proper planning and scheduling to be effectively carried out. However, managers involved in closure may be motivated but are not well equipped or do not include skilled team members. Communiqués are seldom transmitted to all stakeholders of project closure.

Regular updates are required to monitor the project and to ensure its correct trajectory towards critical milestones and goals. This power of regular updates is not effectively manifested within a project.

Team members are a critical factor to a success of a project. As they look after their responsibility for project success, similarly the management has responsibility to look after their success and psychological behavior during and post closure. Teams may become uncomfortable or lose confidence on initiation of the closing phase without prior knowledge of the process, leading to lack of interest on their present activities. They may start looking for a new job and leave during a project as they speculate their little or no significance. They may have the following questions haunting their minds:

- What will happen after project closure?
- Will I be re-located?
- Where will I be re-located?
- Is there a new project within the company?
- If not, then is the company going to downsize?
- A new project...who'll be promoted?

All these thoughts and many more hinder in their contribution towards a successful project closure. Following are discrete guidelines that may ensure managing for a successful project closure.

III. PROJECT CLOSURE COMMUNIQUÉ

Communication is always vital for any process to be successful. Communication is the backbone for human survival and prosperity.

A project team involved in all previous stages of a project, very well deserves to be part of the final stage. They are the best knowledge carriers of the project and can utilize it for effective and successful project closure.

A. Pre-Closure Communication

Project closure communication should be transmitted to all stakeholders before any project closure activity is initiated. By minimum a month before would intimate and provide enough time for all to come forth with their plans, personal schedules (date & time for their tasks and activities), queries, ideas & suggestions for any changes that are involved in or may affect closure.

This pre-closure communication feedback would then, assist management to devise a suitable and effective plan for closure well before its initiation. This schedule/plan is required then to be circulated to all stakeholders marking a confirmation that project closure is to be initiated within the allocated time.

Anyone can sit in one night and prepare a schedule. But that schedule would not provide healthy results and realistic approach. A person involved in a process or task can provide better input for duration, priority, severity and resource requirement respectively.

Therefore the schedule is owned by the project team as a whole, not just the planners [1].

B. Closure Communication

At initiation, all Stakeholders are to raise their flags ensuring their knowledge and agreement. Two way communications is vital for tracking and monitoring progress.

- According to schedule a sequential process should follow involving all team members and not only the planners [1].
- Each individual should feel comfortable to provide inputs on raised problems.
- Progress information should be shared with all concerned during or at completion of each task before moving forward to the next.
- Continuity, in communication must be implemented thoroughly, throughout the phase.

Loss of continuity in following and updating scheduled processes should be avoided at all costs along with loss of ownership. Latter results due to loss of continuity. For these

two to be possible, the schedule must be healthy & realistic enough.

IV. TEAM BEHAVIOR

Teams are the force that drive and deliver a project. They are responsible for its success or failure. Therefore to bring a project towards an orderly end the team must be carefully looked after, i.e. their behavior should be monitored and their legal requirements should be respected.

Team members are the internal stakeholders of the project. Their proper behavior during and at closure of a project is vital for its success. Especially at closure these members have great changes in their common behavior and psychology. Following scenarios result in a behavioral impact to a project:

Insufficient communication with higher management

Employees may be reluctant to contact higher management to discuss any idea or query they might have. It may be relevant to their personal requirement or for the benefit of the project. This is a psychological behavior that is faced by most team members due to reasons that they maybe nervous to receive a negative response and lose points in regard to their self-esteem and impression with management.

It is the sole responsibility of management to create a comfort level with lower staff members and engage officially as well as on regular life terms. Creating relationships with peers helps to share creative ideas or even solve problems collectively. This can be achieved by:

- Arranging a collective one day gathering or a getaway for few days to interact on regular matters other than official. This helps building a relationship and strengthens communication bonds (with the management as well as the team).
- Regularly meeting with individuals and asking them about their problems regarding the company or job/project (if they are hesitant to convey themselves).
- Monitoring the behavior of employees and assessing them on short targeted tasks (look for behavior such as frustration, confusion, lack of confidence, reluctances in task completion (delays), etc.

Job Insecurity

A great deal of insecurity arises when projects near closure. As explained in the 'refraining from project closure', section of this paper about the different questions that may arise on a team member's mind and affect their ability to perform.

These queries that lead to confusions among team members, are to be handled at closure initiation. They are to be briefed and verified on the following:

- Allocation:
 - a. To a new project within the company.

- b. Handover to another company under responsibility of present company.
- o Communicate downsizing and let offs with sufficient time for the individual to look for further placement (2 -3 months).

Downsizing may be a negative impact, but if communicated well before time still provides answers and helps individual to look for future prospects in due time. This particular communication has been known to have positive effects on employee's performance till the last day of closure.

Loss of personnel confidence

Team's confidence is what results in growth and successful collaboration within a project. Confidence boost ups are to be provided by:

- o Promotional communication (communication should be made otherwise also).
- o Interchanging job description within the project between team members (must be relevant to their knowledge area). This helps refraining from boredom and frustration. It overall helps in gaining a wider platform for experience.
- o Inviting them to meetings on project progress. This will help gain self-belief, as they will come to understand that they hold significance and are under eye of management. They are after all part of the system.
- o Awarding employees according to achievements. Even a simple 'Good Job' acknowledgement would do the trick.

These and many others greatly influence a team member's ability to perform at his best with sincerity for the project. Management must be in line with the team, constantly communicating with them in respect to what they think is best for them or by answering their queries as truly and as best as possible. There must be a comfort level between these two levels for propagation of ideas and suggestions for better of the project.

If the team is cared for, the project by design is cared for.

V. SCHEDULING AND ACTIVITY ASSIGNMENT

Strict contractual obligation or otherwise, the schedule must be prepared keeping in mind that the forecasted dates are accurate and well in timeline. Schedule preparing must refrain from:

- o Preparation from external consultants' [1].
- o Higher management single handedly preparing the schedule within a couple of days [1].

A. Everyone is involved – centralized ownership

The scheduled produced through the above mentioned points may be accurate and effective in terms of contract. But as it is the sole ownership of the manager or the consultant, the team members may feel little commitment to it.

Ownership of the schedule should be centralized to the internal as well as the external stakeholders. This can be achieved by following the subsequent points:

- o Involve all team members; ask for durations and inputs from the people responsible for the tasks [1].
- o Full review is carried with the teams consent and knowledge [1].
- o Management should be open to comments, suggestions, questions and objections [1].
- o All stakeholders should signoff on the agreed schedule [1].

Schedule prepared through collaboration and inputs/feedbacks for activities owned by individual's results in the most accurate and valuable of resources. This can be profitable in terms of:

- o Each individual would feel responsible to follow the schedule (as he/she had provided input regarding a specific activity). They own their assigned processes.
- o Tasks are equally divided within the project team with their consent.
- o Teams perform much better in inter related (dependable) activities due to knowledge of each activity allocation and time line.

B. Resource requirement and activity assignment

Analyze the overall resource requirement for the closure process. Relocate extra resources in manners described in the 'team behavior' sections of this paper. As already stated, that project closure is itself a whole project; therefore, by default the tradeoffs are scope, time, cost, quality and available resources. Closure should be completed in a defined time frame; its activities should be described and cost analyzed with respect to assigned resources. The quality for project closure is of utmost importance which is gained by honestly and genuinely planning and applying the latter three points. Vis-à-vis the following should be well thought-out before activity assignment.

- o If resources are limited, survive by resource leveling and balancing processes, depending on the project size.
- o Carry out a comprehensive risk assessment and ensure improvement or access to other possibilities to carry out the process.

By this point in time,

- (1) Initiation of closure process has been communicated, and all stakeholders involved.
- (2) Team members queries are answered, their confusions cleared and suggestions recorded.
- (3) A realistic schedule has been assigned to processes with the 'centralized ownership' approach.
- (4) Resources have been agreeably involved in their respective roles and responsibilities.

The story has been planned; actors are ready for their roles, now what is required is to implement and present this plan.

VI. MONITORING AND REGULAR UPDATES

When processes are implemented they have to be monitored. When monitoring projects a by product is 'change' or 'technical variance'. These variances bring about chaos to the planned schedule, especially. Henceforth disturbance in schedule bring panic to stakeholders. It is human psychology not to deal with change. But in competition the universe is all about change and entropy.

Variances may occur in:

- Scope [1] – Objectives increase or decrease – inter dependability may change – e.g. contractual terms and agreements.
- Time - tasks complete earlier or may be delayed.
- Risks [1] – unforeseen events occur for which undesired measures are undertaken.
- Resources – human resources leave for new projects or opportunities while other resources such as budget, material, etc. become insufficient.
- Methods – evolve or change completely.

Variances have a great deal of effect on the stakeholders.

This effect is prominent through behavioral changes

- They lose their ownership in tasks.
- Lose commitment to the project as frustration overtakes.

These behaviors must be confronted and a procedure should be adapted for properly upgrading a schedule.

- Task ownership must be retained with actual owners/project team.
- Initial baseline of the project should be maintained
 - a. The schedule update should be referenced with the baseline along with difference in time line to track variances.
- Actual progress should be recorded with actual dates.

Updating the schedule in accordance to variances

- (1) The planner identifies the change [1].
- (2) The problem is referred back to the project team involved for the particular task [1].
- (3) The team with collaboration from external stakeholders develops and reports a solution [1].
- (4) All internal and external stakeholders are informed of updates [1].
- (5) A mutual consensus is communicated [1].
- (6) The planner/management updates the schedule [1].

Regular monitoring and updating variances is important for successful closure. The processes are always in need of regular improvements. Regular improvements in projects are all dependent on the need of commitment from teams.

One should be dedicated to drive continual improvement and innovation by inviting feedback on variances and changes.

VII. PROJECT CLOSURE

Project closure is the last phase of a project life cycle in which all constituent processes should be closed. Also any contract involved in the project must be closed before the closure of the involved project is complete. The project performance data is to be consolidated into a final performance analysis report, which should summarize the results in context to the organizations objectives and goals [2].

Applying the guidelines stated in this paper can greatly help management to motivate and understand team members. Help and resolve issues related to the project as well as the team, before time. Remove communication gaps within stakeholders and to initiate and further proceed with effective and successful closure activities.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Remember that irrespective of project success or failure an effective and well carried out closure is vital to learn and gain precious experience or knowledge as to what oriented these result. Yes, in terms of improper closure the victims are all the stakeholders and not just the team members finalizing the project after its implementation. It is also important to review the project and document the lessons learned before disbanding the project team. This will greatly benefit the future projects in terms of implementation and closure within the relevant industry.

REFERENCES

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