

Basic Project Planning and Management

Getting Started

A guide for making sure your project gets off on the right foot.

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INTRODUCTION

You are probably reading this because you want to do something; want to improve something – relative to a business or organization – and want to approach it as a project. The primary goal of this white paper is to try to help you! A word of warning: If you elect to skip anything, you are jeopardizing your chance for success.

Where should you start? Business Basics!

Most people that have been in business and are experienced can skip this section – *or should you?*

Too many times, I have gone into large, well-known organizations and asked some simple questions – or so I thought. What is your business goals and objectives? Who are your customers, and do you really know what they want or need? What are you trying to do, and why? Let's just say some of the answers or comments were bizarre. It is no wonder that some of those same companies are in trouble or have gone out of business.

Business Goals and Objective – Strategy

One of the toughest things to do, especially for people who do not have business experience or training, is to set realistic objectives. The objectives need to start at a high level – for the entire business. They may be based on personal objectives, but these objectives must be useful to explain to employees, contractors, vendors, and customers, exactly what you are trying to achieve, overall. There may be some personal objectives that you need to leave out or rephrase from a business perspective.

Most of all, don't kid yourself – you need clear business goals and objectives.

[Establishing Business Strategy, Goals and Objectives are actually outside the scope of this paper.

As with anything you find in this paper, if you have any questions, please contact the author and he will try to help.]

A reason, perhaps the only reason, for doing anything is to achieve the business goals and objectives. That includes any project. Many projects have failed, or failed to achieve the desired results, because the goals and objective have not been clearly stated – somewhat specific, and definitely not “wishy-washy.” This is clearly the responsibility of the organization leadership.

Obviously, you are trying to **help** your customers/clients in some way; and to make a profit or at least cover your costs. Therefore, it is important to know what your customers want or need. Sometimes they don't know what they need, themselves. Understanding the customer should be based on actual facts or research of what the customer wants – not opinion. This is also called voice of the customer (VOC). You should also have some financial objectives; revenue or profit.

A Mission and/or Vision Statement is also helpful – but again, that is outside the scope of this paper – and may be more confusing.

Your organization has certain unique knowledge, skills, and abilities, and enablers to achieving the goals and objectives. These are also called core competencies that make your business product or service unique and meaningful.

Everything **MUST** start from, support, and help achieve these business goals and objectives! They become the driving force for the organization and the project. If they are not clear and understood, you are at serious risk, to say the least.

Why are you considering a project or initiative? If you are not starting a project or initiative that focused on the goals and objectives, you are asking for problems. Many times, someone kicks off a project with their “own agenda;” perhaps because they want a new technology or application. Huge mistake. A guiding principle should be **DO NOT** implement any technology unless it is satisfying an overall business goal **AND** improves the business processes.

BEFORE YOU START

Some things to keep in mind before you get started.

Documentation

Document everything. When this white paper states “define,” put it in writing – it is highly likely that it may need to be changed and it is a good audit trail as you go and when the project is over – to understand lessons that you learned during the project. You will inevitably find that good documentation will ultimately save you and other people time and effort.

Sponsor

Before you start any project or initiative, you need an “executive sponsor.” Preferably, someone that is high enough in the organization (or the owner) that believes in what the project is trying to achieve and fully supports it.

This person must be committed to the project, whatever it is. Sponsor is covered in more detail, below. It is one of the major reasons for project success or failure.

Holistic (Big Picture) View

A definition of an enterprise should include anyone, any other organization, or any thing that comes in contact with the organization and it’s business.

Some examples of external influences:

Customers, suppliers, contractors, vendors, resellers, partners, state and local agencies (e.g., regulatory, social/civic, tax, etc.), and the community where the organization operates.

When you are considering any project or initiative, you will have to, at least, **be aware** of these external influences – and how they might affect the organization, employees, and processes. Any one might have an impact on the project.

Organization Culture

What is the organizations culture? Is it ready and willing to change? Does it need to be more organized? Whatever the culture, consider it when planning for the project and any changes. If the organization is risk adverse, you will have to be conservative in what you are proposing. You will have to be very convincing with facts and benefits.

People/employees are naturally adverse to any changes. Get them involved, from the start, will definitely help. However, you probably are not able to involve everyone. They can be a wealth of information. You just need to make sure it is fact-based and relevant – not just opinion or biases.

What is the leadership style? The same holds true with the leadership culture. Sometimes, you may find employees ready for change, when the leadership is not – for whatever reason. If leadership is not ready for change, you are pushing the proverbial rope.

Be realistic. Think of it as “appetite for change,” and dish up only what they can eat.

Roads to Failure

History is riddled with failed projects, companies, and organizations. These are just some of problems to consider and avoid.

- Lack of commitment, resistance, involvement, at any level
- Piecemeal approach
- Obsessive focus on silos or perceived problem areas
- Arbitrary programs or initiatives (personal agendas)
- Need “this” now; avoiding the root cause and holistic view
- Too many “pet” projects or technology
- No solid alignment with overall, rationalized business goals and objectives
- Looking for the “silver bullet”
- Implementing a system or technology to solve a problem without emphasizing value to the business
- Too many “other things to do;” too busy “fighting fires”
- Squeaky wheel prioritization
- Turning the project over to a department (like IT) or individual – without clear direction, guidance, and direct/involved support and commitment (halfhearted)

These are just some of the problems reported by many surveys on why projects succeed or fail.

Other Considerations

When starting a project, some other things may make your life easier.

Past project, programs, and initiatives

Learn from them. What worked, what didn't, and why? Most times you will find good information that can be used or re-used. Just make sure it is accurate. Find out the real reason something failed or failed to achieve the desired results. Why isn't it being used or re-used today? Don't repeat past mistakes. On the other hand, what worked well, and why? What can be leveraged or reused?

Resource availability

Almost everyone makes the mistake of thinking that resources are available for a project – time, money, people, equipment, etc.

The most frequent mistake happens with people and their time availability. Some experienced project managers ask how much time people have, and then cut it in half for planning purposes.

Consultants and contractors

There are books written on this subject. There is a right time to use external consultants and contractors. The rule of thumb is to use them only when:

- a) there is no other choice,
- b) you want to learn something specific from them, or
- c) you want the time (and have the money) to do something faster than you could do internally.

As with any decision, make sure you are doing it for the right reason – especially when you spend money. Do you really need to spend that money for that purpose, or are there other alternatives, or can it be delayed, for good business reasons! Make sure it is a real priority and need.

The selection of the right consultant/contractor is important. Do not leave it to chance or even to the recommendation of a friend or associate. Be sure that you have clearly identified your needs and requirements – what do you need the consultant to do, specifically. Then, find the most qualified, considering cost.

In most cases, you want a consultant to come in, do the job, share their knowledge and experience, and teach you something. You want to learn from them, as much as possible. If they are reluctant, you don't want them. You are the customer/client. Remember that you can't turn over your decisions to them. You have to give them clear guidance and direction.

Narrowing the Opportunities

You can't do everything. How do you select a project that is a priority and has the most value to the organization?

Look at the business goals and objectives and determine. Determine what needs to be done to achieve them; what is not being done or done well. Often, there will be too many things to do, some massive and some small. Keep in mind all that has been stated above. What's the appetite for change? What resources are available?

If in doubt, select something that is relatively easy and achievable in a relatively short time – SMART (specific, measurable, accountable, realistic, and time bound). But also, you have to consider what is most needed by the organization to achieve the goals and objectives. With that in mind, you can break it up into bite-size pieces or phases.

When you have identified some things that need to be done, you need to prioritize, again based on all the above. It is worthwhile to make sure that you have the most support and commitment as possible.

Then, select an area for a project where you are confident you can achieve and will have meaningful value.

SCOPING THE PROJECT

You have selected an area for improvement or possibly something new. Whatever it is, you have to determine the scope and boundaries for the project.

Basic Project Planning and Management

Start with an initial list of project goals and objectives. Select and solidify these as you develop your project plan.

In order to maximize value, the desired outcome should be a “stretch,” but make sure it is realistic and achievable. Watch for anything that may lead to “scope creep” – anything ambiguous or unknown – and make some clear assumptions or statements as to what is within the scope and outside the scope. The more detail, the better it define the scope and make your job easier.

Scope creep is a common problem with any project. It usually happens when someone wants to change something in, or about, the project that has no direct bearing on the stated goals and objectives of the project. The worst scope creep is when the project goals and objectives change, more by whim, rather than good business reasons. However, you may need to review a requested change in view of the project goals and objectives and the overall business goals and objectives. Change and change control is covered below.

Identify the risk factors. This is not as hard as most people make it. What may lead to problems? Some things are totally unknown, but anything that can be identified as a potential risk needs to be identified; how big a risk it is; and how the risk might be mitigated or resolved. [example of risks; and how mitigated]

Defining the scope should be continuous and iterative as you develop the project plan.

Executive Sponsor

Any project requires an executive sponsor – someone who wants the project to accomplish the objectives and is willing to help remove any potential roadblocks such as management commitment, indecision, and conflicts of any kind. The sponsor should be well respected throughout most of the organization and have authority to make the project successful.

Steering Committee

Depending on the size of your organization, you may want or need a group of managers or decision makers (sometimes even a union rep, if you have a union) to provide guidance and buy into the project. Determine participants based on how the project might ultimately affect them. These people will need to agree with the project objectives and plan, and therefore commit to the success. They may be required to make decisions across various departments or functions. That is another reason why you need to consider the project from an enterprise-wide view.

Project Plan

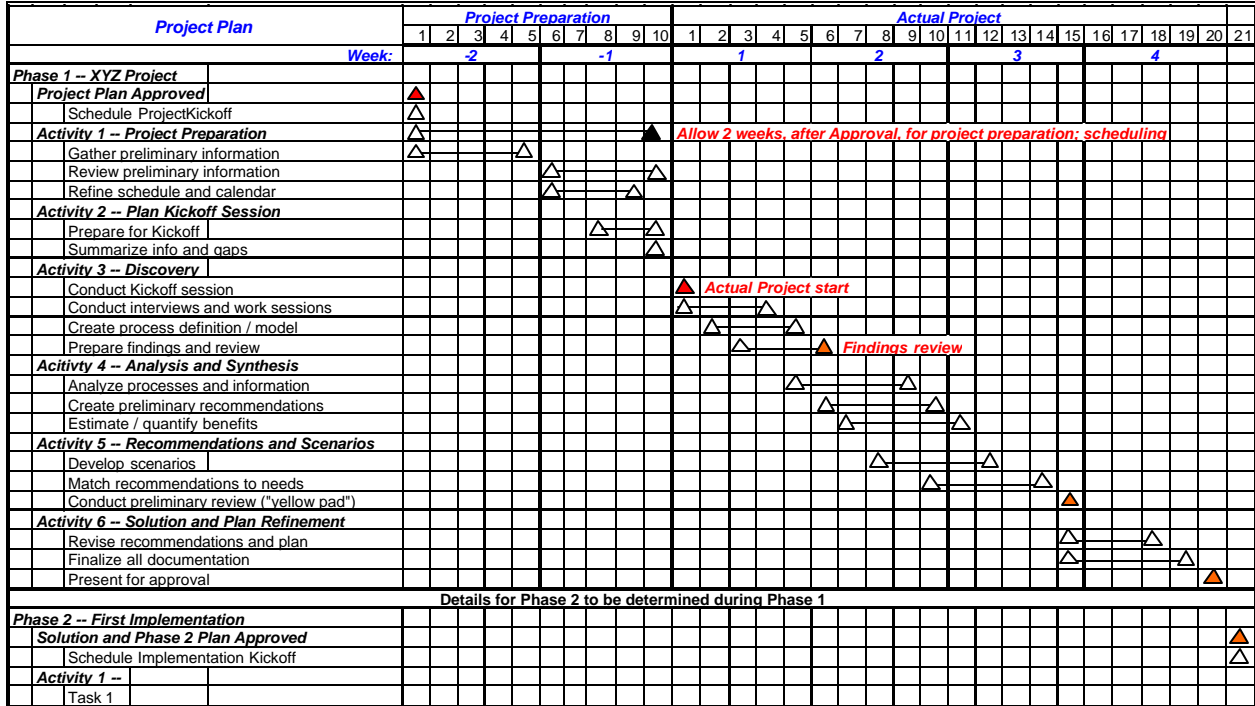
A project plan is simply a plan to achieve a certain objective. You need to start by defining the specific objectives of the project. Keep in mind that the project objectives must align with the business goals and objectives. Then, consider what you will need to do in order to achieve those project objectives.

Again, books have been written on this subject, with various suggested ways of doing it, and depending on the scope and complexities. Keep it as simple as possible; yet complete in order to achieve the objectives.

Basic Project Planning and Management

Develop a plan that can be followed and executed by specific people. One way is to consider an outline, with Phase, Activity, and Task.

Example Project Plan



Tasks are those things that need to be done by someone. Phase and Activity are groupings. Break tasks down into 8 hours, or less. Assign one person responsible to make sure it is completed properly; others may be needed to assist. Think about tasks and write them in the format, "verb noun," such as Order food, pickup food, etc.

List all the tasks necessary to achieve the objectives. Then, consider how long each task should take. It is important to consider the fact that people are usually not 100% dedicated to doing that specific task, have other things to do, or simply may not focus all their efforts to get it done on time. Allow for the unexpected – such as phone calls or other interruptions. They will occur.

Some people plan for 50% availability, even if people are dedicated to the project. If they are not dedicated, you had better know how much time they really have for the project.

Consider task dependencies. Certain tasks must be completed before a subsequent task. The project plan should flow logically to the desired objectives.

Communications Plan

In conjunction with a project plan, you need a communications plan, depending on the size of the organization. The purpose of the communications plan is to keep everyone informed as to the progress or problems that may affect them.

Basic Project Planning and Management

Example Communications Plan

Communications Plan				
Purpose of Document: To define all parties with an interest in the project and the means and frequency of communication between them and the project.				
Audience	Objectives	Method	Timing	Success
• Sponsor	• Regular status	• Weekly status report	• Weekly	• Satisfied with level of detail; involved
• Board of Directors	• Awareness	• Regular board meeting agenda	•	•
• Executive team	• Support • Consensus	• Regular meeting agenda	•	•
• Functional managers	• Agreement • Support • Enforcement	• Monthly report	•	•
• Users	• Awareness • Training • Benefits	• Monthly report	•	•
• Clients	•	•	•	•
• Vendors	•	•	•	•

Three of the top activities, especially for large or wide-spread projects, are: Communicate, Communicate, and Communicate. You need continued support and commitment to achieve real success. Over-communicate, but be factual and don't ramble. Make sure you have something of interest to communicate. Communicate at least weekly with the sponsor.

Require all project team members to do a weekly status report. This will do two things. First, it will clearly identify the project status. Second, you can use it to manage the project and create other reports.

Example Status Report

Weekly Status Report	
Name:	Week Ending: {date}
Accomplishments <i>(These are to be actual accomplishments, not "working on")</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete draft of Business Strategy • Develop website action list 	
Planned for Next Week <i>(These are to be what you intend to "accomplish" next week)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare draft for Marketing meeting • Conduct Marketing meeting • Complete Marketing Plan 	
Issues <i>(These are any issues or problems that need to be addressed by others)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need printer for project team 	

Task and Team selection

You can create your project plan without identifying specific people who will do the tasks. Plus, you will have to create a plan, in order to let them (or their management) know how much of their time will be required.

When you have approval to proceed with the project, try to get the commitment of and for the best person for the task. This may not always be possible, but don't settle for someone who just happens to be sitting around. Not a good sign. Make sure their manager agrees.

You will have developed your project plan. You will need to review it with your executive sponsor and get whatever approval is needed to proceed.

Changes

Keep in mind that you will, more than likely, have to modify the plan (usually slightly) as you go. Just do not fall victim to scope creep, as mentioned above. If there is a required major change, you probably did not follow the above directions and considerations.

Your project is at serious risk if you change the project plan, during the actual project, without a good business reason. Use a change process during the project.

Example Change Form

Change Request Form	
Description of change in project plan or scope requested:	
Current scope or plan:	
Estimated impact on project scope or plan:	
Estimated costs for change:	
Schedule impact:	
Benefits or value of change:	
Submitted by:	Date:
Reviewed by: <i>(Typically, any manager impacted by change must review and approve)</i>	Date:
Approved by:	Date:
Change implemented by:	Date:
Additional comments:	

Simply evaluate if a change is required in order to achieve the objectives, or if the change can be implemented later, or in a subsequent, follow on project. If it takes too long, costs too much, or delays the completion of this project, you need to push it off. Just watch how each and every, seemingly, minor change affects the plan or the people. You have to be organized and focused.

PROJECT PREPARATION

Preparation is obviously critical and needs emphasis. As with anything else, the more preparation you do, the smoother things will go. You have to find the middle of the road between two extremes – over-planning and under-planning. However, most people under prepare and plan. The following are highly recommended, as a minimum. If you can do more, quickly, it will help, providing it is meaningful to the project.

Project Team Kickoff

After approval and you have identified the project team, conduct a Project Team Kickoff meeting. It should include the executive sponsor and all the people who will be responsible for accomplishing the tasks on the project plan. Others may want to be included, but try to keep the attendees to those most critical to the project plan and tasks. This meeting is different from a “Project Kickoff” meeting, which is described below.

The executive sponsor lends support, credibility, and emphasis to the importance of the project and the need for everyone’s commitment.

What you will want to cover are the items on this typical agenda:

- Project scope, goals and objectives – and importance
- Roles and responsibilities of all
- Tools, methods, and standards to be used by all
- Communications, including weekly status reports
- Relevant information gathered to date
- The project plan

Make sure you explain everything and everyone has the opportunity to ask questions. There may also be suggestions or information. If it is relevant, make notes and add the information.

Project Library

Establish a central library or repository for all documents or information related, in any way, to the project. Make it easily accessible to anyone involved with the project. You may also establish versions or naming conventions for specific or working documents.

Team Building

Team dynamics, personalities, and hidden agendas can undermine a project. Be prepared for the usual Norming, Storming, Forming, and Performing. Not many projects take place without some level of these dynamics. Simply, it takes people time to form into an effective team to perform the project tasks in the most effective way. At first, everyone should be pleasant and accommodating. Then, personalities get in the way

and there may be conflict. Your job is to be aware of this and keep everyone focused. Also, keep in mind that outside contractors may be an integral part of the team – the same applies with them. Finally, you should be able to motivate or form an effective team that performs the tasks well, and gets the project done. Don't you wish it would be that simple?

You should have allowed sufficient time for all the above, before scheduling the Project Kickoff meeting. This should include time for the team to review any and all documentation. Then, plan and conduct a follow up meeting to answer any additional questions or determine any decisions that may be needed. At this follow up meeting, you can determine when to schedule the Project Kickoff meeting, if you have not done so already. Always allow sufficient time for people to plan for and schedule time to attend. Executives and managers usually need more advance notice.

Project Kickoff

You have scheduled the kickoff meeting with the appropriate attendees – anyone who is directly involved with the project, or may be significantly impacted by the results – at least management.

The purpose of the Project Kickoff meeting is two-fold. First, officially start the project. Second, let key people know what the project is about and make them aware of their expected involvement.

The typical agenda covers these points:

- Project purpose, goals, objectives, and scope
- Who will be involved and at what levels
- How the project will be managed (especially communications)
- What is expected of them
- Project plan – at a high level
- Immediate next steps

Keep the meeting focused, and be ready to let people know that you will answer any questions, which are not generic to everyone in attendance, at a later time. Have someone take notes, especially any suggestions, or potential problems. If something is quick and easy to address, assign the right person to follow up and get back to you for the next meeting. Keep moving and focused.

Be aware that not everyone may agree. Make note and move on. Meet with them, individually, and try to understand and address their disagreement.

Immediate Next Steps

You will have laid out the project plan and should be ready to start the project immediately at the conclusion of the Project Kickoff meeting. At a minimum, you will have to verify the information that you have obtained to date.

Depending on how much validation or discovery is needed, you should at least be prepared to start. There are other ways to prepare for this, such as pre-meetings with the steering committee, memos from the executive sponsor, etc. It depends on how large the project scope or organization.

If you need to interview or validate information with people, you should already have scheduled them to start at the conclusion of the meeting.

THE PROJECT

Virtual every project has the same phases or activities as indicated in the example plan, Discovery, Analysis, Synthesis, Recommendations, Solution Building, and then Implementation.

- Discovery – fact finding
- Analysis – finding improvements and root cause of problems
- Synthesis – consolidate facts and analysis into rational business situational considerations
- Recommendations – develop a list of potential recommendations for improvements and problem resolutions – and prioritization
- Solution Building – selection of the optimal solution for highest value in the shortest time to maximize achievement of goals and objectives
- Implementation – implementing the solution.

Depending on the project, Implementation is usually a separate phase, such as:

- Functional requirements definition
- Technical requirements definition
- Construction and Testing
- Production start or “Go Live”

However, unless you have done the initial phases, you should not attempt any implementation. How could you possibly come up with an optimum solution without doing the basics? Implementation is covered in a subsequent white paper.

Discovery

Simply put; get the facts and figures. Those facts and figures that are relevant to the current scope and processes.

The objective is to gather the facts on the current process, specific metrics or measurements, and begin to identify areas for potential improvement. Gather all the relevant, available information from whatever sources are available.

As indicated, you need to review all current information before you start any interviews or meetings. Assuming that you have done this, the next step is to validate that information for accuracy and correctness. Things may have changed.

Some of the best ways to conduct the discovery activities are:

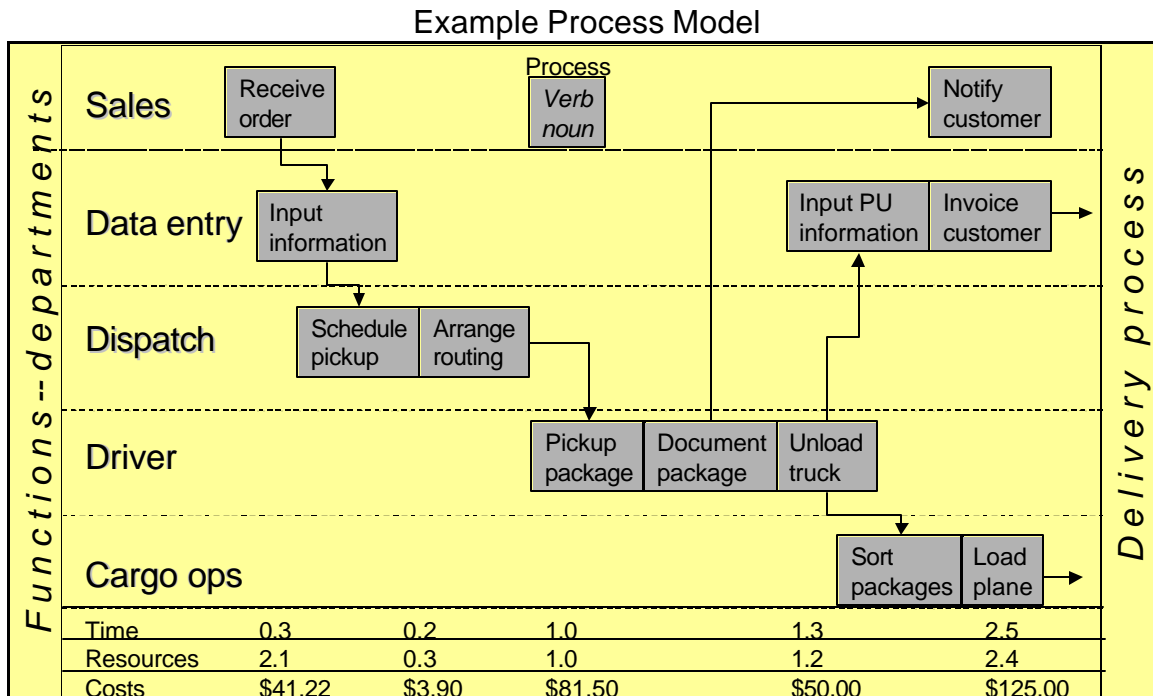
- Interviews – suggest one-on-one for candor and completeness
- Observation – watch how things are actually done, paying attention to the details – what works, what doesn't, what can be improved
- Working sessions – with people who perform a process, function, activity, or task – get consensus on all information

Basic Project Planning and Management

After you feel you have a solid grasp on how things are done, you need to document everything. You should be documenting as you go.

Good documentation may include:

- Process and procedure write ups / documents
- Process models or maps
- Summarization documents



When you have completed your discover and findings, you want to review the facts (and documents) with key people to make sure the facts are accurate and complete. Validate all the information, especially the metrics and measures. Frequently, you will have to make changes; document them and the reasons for changes.

The objective for the discovery activities is to make sure you understand the business and how things are done – and that the majority, if not all, agree with your understanding and the facts.

Analysis

In the analysis activities, you are analyzing all the facts that you have gathered during discover – looking for opportunities for improvement and solutions to problems.

Metrics are important simply because you cannot move forward with solid rationalization instead of opinion without real, fact-based measurements.

Some problems or solutions will jump out at you. Resist the temptation to select a solution until you have done a thorough analysis of all the facts. Often times, fixing a problem in one area may create another problem in another area.

Analysis is often taking place from before the project starts. Here, you are documenting the analysis, in detail; identifying areas that require more investigation or research; and

beginning to narrow the key elements for an optimum solution. Notice that it says key elements – not the final solution. Otherwise, jumping to a solution, you may miss an important fact or relationship.

You also do not want to fall into “analysis paralysis.” Once you have reviewed ALL the facts, contributing factors, and supporting details, and have narrowed the problems or opportunities for improvement, you need to move on.

Synthesis

Based on all your facts, findings, and analysis, you begin to identify major groupings or overall ideas that underlie potential recommendations for improvement.

Here again, you must consider all that has been mentioned previously. Goals and objectives, scope, cultural change, etc. Keep the high level, enterprise view in mind.

You also begin to develop scenarios – “what if” scenarios to consider some initial ideas for improvement that came up during discovery and analysis.

The objective is to come up with likely scenarios of what the business might look like and do to achieve the goals and objectives better. Identify what is feasible in the short and long term.

During these activities, you will begin to solidify your recommendations – what you will propose needs to be done to achieve the goals and objectives; improve the business; and what may generate real, quantifiable results. Always keep metrics and measures in mind when considering scenarios and recommendations; asking what quantifiable difference will this make. Also, keep track of qualitative improvements, but to a much lesser degree.

Recommendations

By now, you should have a pretty good list of recommendations of things that can be done to improve the business. If you have done a good job of following these steps and activities, it is likely that a prioritization of implementing those recommendations will appear obvious.

However, more analysis and work needs to be done. A cost/benefit analysis will help with a SMART prioritization. Keep in mind everything mentioned above, especially appetite for change, costs, and time. You may be able to break down long time and cost recommendations into smaller pieces or phases.

Recommendations are those specific actions that will address the problems or opportunities for improvement that you have identified. Frequently, you will find that one recommendation will satisfy more than one need or problem.

Solution Building

The solution usually addresses a group of problems or opportunities that you have identified, and shows the value to the organization if implemented. It has to make good business sense – the best possible, with any constraints or limitations. Most important, it addresses how (better) to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization.

Basic Project Planning and Management

In essence, you are creating your next project (the solution), based on solid business fact and rationale. Obviously, you need to implement a solution. Therefore, you also need to consider the best way to implement a solution.

A solution is the culmination of your work to this point. It is a solid business reason for doing things differently to achieve the business goals and objectives, with limited resources. It will indicate the qualitative and quantitative reasons and value if the recommendations are followed.

An overall solution may require a long time and significant resources. However, you are breaking it down into SMART phases – the shorter, the better.

Implementation

In considering your solution, you have to break it down into SMART phases. Therefore, you select which phases to implement immediately and create a detailed plan. It should be only one phase to prove the value and/or convince management (or yourself).

Make sure the implementation plan is very specific and you have accurately estimated all time and costs.

As indicate, there are some additional elements or activities to consider when actually implementing the new processes or solution, such as functional and technical requirements.

A subsequent white paper will address Implementation.

FINAL NOTE

At this point, you either are ready to implement or need to present it to management for approval.

If you have to present to management, make a formal presentation that is concise, to the point, and based on sound business logic. You should have all the information that you need to convince management of the need and value, if you have followed these steps and activities. Keep it short and to the point.

Be prepared for questions with backup documentation and information, along with the facts for your recommended solution. Keep in mind that there is also the solution “to do nothing.”

Finally, you should plan to do two more things after approval or rejection.

- Review what you did on this project, or conduct a “lessons-learned” meeting with the core team. What could you have done differently, better, or not at all?
- “Audit” the results. Did the project achieve the desired results – quantitatively and qualitatively? And, again, what could you have done better?