

Visualizing Project Success for a Hole-in-One

by Michael G. Martin, PMP



If you've ever played golf, you know that it can be one of the most enjoyable and one of the most frustrating games ever invented.

For those of you who are brave enough to admit that you have purposefully chosen to pursue this sport as a hobby, chances are you have taken lessons to increase the likelihood that you will have more enjoyable days than frustrating ones. During the lessons, the instructor probably told you that to make the shot, you first had to visualize it. In other words, you had to develop a visual image of yourself addressing the ball, then hitting the shot, and ultimately seeing the ball go in the hole. The theory is that visualizing the shot gives your mind a mental guide to follow in reality. Those of you who have experienced this type of visualization, and have done it successfully, know that it can actually work.

Wouldn't it be nice if you could take this same approach to managing projects? After all, there are many similarities between the two endeavors. For instance, managing a project can be extremely exciting and enjoyable one day, and then the next day everything falls apart and it becomes one of the most frustrating experiences imaginable. However, just like golf, the more you practice and gain experience in managing projects, the more likely you are to have good days rather than bad ones. The difference comes in gaining practical, hands-on experience. In golf, you can take a lesson or go to a driving range to prepare for the real situation; practicing to do project management can be somewhat more challenging.

So, how do you practice project management without actually doing it in a real-life situation? One option is to use project management simulations. Simulations can offer project managers the opportunity to manage a fictional project, with a fictional team, and encounter real-life scenarios, such as scope changes, budget reductions, employee turnover, quality constraints, and unreasonable stakeholder requirements—to name just a few. Not only does simulation offer managers the ability to gain experience outside of a real situation, but it also allows them to do it without leaving their home or office. Using an approach known as *system*

you increase the number of resources. This type of rationale, however, doesn't consider other factors that come into play when you start adding resources. For example, you may have to pull your more experienced team members from project work to help train and orient the new team members to bring them up to speed on the project. This, in turn, will cause a decrease in productivity rather than an increase—thus delaying project completion rather than expediting it.

Frederick Brooks, Jr., first identified this phenomenon in his book titled *The Mythical Man Month*. This phenomenon is appropriately referred to as Brooks' Law, which states that: "Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later."

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dynamics thinking, organizations can build models to emulate the types of projects that are specific to their industry or organization.

System dynamics is different from most simulations, which use a *cause and effect* approach, in that it takes into account both the tangible and intangible variables that may impact a project—and their relationship to each other and the overall project. For instance, if a client were to ask you to expedite the schedule to complete a project two weeks early, what would your first reaction be? It might be to increase the number of resources on the project based on the assumption that productivity will increase if

Although Brooks' Law is written for software projects, it can theoretically be applied to any type of project.

Another impact of adding resources is that new team members may not be experienced in doing that type of work, which could lead to potential quality problems with the work being performed. This, in turn, could lead to what is known as the *rework cycle*, which in some cases may make up the majority of the work effort on a project.

As you can see from this scenario, there are many interrelationships between the project variables. It's these interrelationships that are often unaccounted for when planning a project, which in turn leads to

project failure. By using simulations, project managers are able to gain experience in dealing with scenarios that could negatively impact the success of a project. The real benefit, though, is that the managers can gain this experience without putting the organization or project at financial risk.

Simulations can be used not only to train project managers, but to also to test an individual's competency. If your organization is considering an internal certification process, for example, the use of a simulation will provide you with a viable option to determine whether an individual is competent to manage a certain type or size of project. Increasing the experience and competency of the project manager will improve the probability that projects will be completed successfully, as well as the margin of profitability per project.

In golf, the more practice and experience you gain, the better you're able to play and visualize your shots. The same can be said for project management. The more experience and exposure a manager gains in dealing with project scenarios, the better that individual will be at planning and visualizing what it will take to make the project successful.

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Managing Your Stakeholders: A Project within the Project

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customer, and the users. Look also to outside agencies for stakeholders, especially if law or special interests groups regulate your project.

There are always some organizational managers who don't fit the strict notion of vested interest but still feel that they are stakeholders. The successful project manager will determine who these players are and include them in his or her stakeholder management plan. Usually, the unidentified or would-be stakeholders are the ones who can undermine a project before the project manager is even aware of a problem.

Managing the Stakeholders

It is important to identify the project stakeholders, but it is absolutely critical that you discover their position—that is, whether they are for or against the project and why. A simple worksheet is a great help. For example:

Stakeholder Name	+	0	-	Reason for Position	Strengths & Weaknesses	Strategy

Using the worksheet, identify each stakeholder and check the appropriate column to indicate whether he or she is for, neutral, or against the project. The next step is to determine the reason for their position and their strengths and weaknesses relative to their influence on the project. With this information, the project team can develop a strategy for moving the stakeholder to a positive position.

Steps in the Process

Analyzing stakeholders should be a

project team effort. Managing the process is the project manager's responsibility.

The steps in the stakeholder management process can be summarized as:

1. Identify stakeholders
2. Determine stakeholders' position on the project
3. Determine stakeholders' agenda
4. Assess stakeholder strengths and weaknesses relative to their influence on the project
5. Identify strategy to move stakeholders to a positive position on the project
6. Predict stakeholder reaction to the strategy
7. Implement the stakeholder management strategy.

This list of actions is simple in concept but difficult to implement

successfully unless you are politically aware of the corporate culture and possess effective interpersonal skills. It is imperative, however, to manage your stakeholders. Your project successes will increase significantly when you do.

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