

Running Your First Project

Brought to you by Assemble You.

It's time to work on YOU. So sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

Landing that first project management role is a pretty exciting and fulfilling moment, but it's also incredibly daunting. You've got a ton of responsibility on your shoulders all of a sudden. The project's success now depends on what you do, so the company, the team, and the stakeholders will count on you to do a good job.

People unaware of the importance of project management might view it as a customary position to appear that the project has someone leading the charge. A figurehead without whom the project could probably survive but is kept for image purposes.

That couldn't be further from the truth. Project managers are essential because leadership is hugely beneficial in achieving an aim. Ben Aston discussed the importance of the position in an article for Digital Project Manager and said:

Without project management, a team could be like a ship without a rudder; moving, but without direction, control or purpose. Leadership allows and enables teams to do their best work. Project management provides leadership and vision, motivation, removing roadblocks, coaching, and inspiring the team to do their best work.

Approach your first project with this attitude. Acknowledge that you've got a responsibility to a long list of people. That it is up to you to ensure that:

- the goals of the project are clear,
- everyone understands their responsibilities,
- there is a defined, actionable plan,

- and that all potential risks of the project are understood and can be managed

There's a lot of work that goes into it. Because it's your first project, there will be a reasonably steep learning curve, but the skills and knowledge that you will develop will be worth it.

Let's discuss how you can run a successful first project in more depth.

A good thing to consider in the early stages is the methodology you want to use for your first project. Though selecting one single methodology and sticking to it may seem restrictive on the surface, it's actually a good way to add a level of consistency to your project and give you something to constantly refer back to when you're unclear on what your next step is.

It will provide you with a specific framework of already established techniques and actions that have a history of success. There are two primary methodologies, the most commonly used of which is the 'Waterfall' approach. This is a direct process, and the name is quite apt because the individual phases of the project flow downwards. You start by devising a concrete plan which is then executed to the letter and finally, formally closed.

There are different teams for each stage of the process, and when one team finishes their part, it's moved onto the next team. There is no moving back to a previous stage, and nothing is delivered until the project is complete. This is perfect in some cases, but it may be too inflexible for some projects and teams. Leeron Hoory and Cassie Bottroff did a comprehensive analysis of this approach on *Forbes* and made this point:

...the Waterfall methodology does not involve frequent feedback or collaboration from the client, apart from established milestones or deliverables for each phase. This makes it easier for project managers to plan and communicate with stakeholders or business partners. However, it is also only practical when a client has a clear and fixed end goal and does not need to be involved in the process of the project's development.

It's a system that works for certain projects, especially those in construction or engineering. It's worth considering for your first project because its techniques are well established and have been used to great effect for years.

For projects that are more focused on customer engagement, experimentation, and frequent deliverables to clients, Agile would be the more appropriate methodology to use.

This comes in a few different forms, such as Scrum, Lean, and Kanban, but the general approach is similar.

Agile operates with an iterative system. The project is broken down into individual sections known as "iterations." Each iteration, which will take place over a short period, is conducted by a cross-functional team and has a deliverable ready for feedback from the stakeholders by its conclusion.

This system keeps the stakeholders involved throughout, allowing implementation of their feedback while the project is in motion. The cross-functionality of the team also affords more opportunities for communication among specialists. This benefits such industries as software and science in which adaptation is often essential.

A study for *HBR* about why science-based companies should use Agile analyzed the effect that switching methodologies had for PTC Pharmaceuticals and discovered this:

It adopted a team-based structure to reduce inefficiencies and enable rapid scaling through empowered, cross-functional research, clinical development, and commercial groups...Senior leaders are now more confident about smoothly managing greater complexity. Early results also suggest that the increase in productivity may be sufficient to manage twice as many programs while also increasing the success rate of the projects.

Agile will lead to increased efficiency with a project primarily rooted in science and will also lead to more satisfying results due to the opportunity to make relevant changes throughout. You can rely on one of these methodologies to help your first project run smoothly, and which one you choose will depend on the type of project.

When you've decided on the methodology, you should think about what skills and actions you can adopt to benefit the project. Once again, this is all new territory for a first-time project manager, so it's essential to familiarize yourself with it as much as possible.

One such skill is the ability to determine the scope of a project. Knowing this will inform every decision you make in terms of planning the trajectory of the project and how you divide the labor amongst the team. F. John Reh of The Balance Careers labeled scope as the most critical element of project management and defined it like this:

The project scope is the definition of what the project is supposed to accomplish and the budgets of time and money that have been created to achieve these objectives. Any

change to the scope of the project must have a matching change in budget, time, resources, or all three.

Without clarity on this, your ability to fulfill the expectations of the stakeholders will be limited because you won't fully understand the project's budget and scheduling restrictions.

You should also think about being able to plan. Your selected methodology will give you a framework, but as project manager, it will still be up to you to instruct the team on what is expected of them and guide them through the process. Being a skilled planner is paramount for that. It would be helpful to be clear on the Project Life Cycle and know what goes into each phase of that system, including initiation, planning, execution, monitoring, and closing.

For a waterfall project, you can apply the life cycle to the whole project, but for Agile, each iteration can have a life cycle of its own.

Time management is worth thinking about too. Most projects involve a lot of individual tasks but not a lot of time to get them all done. Good time management doesn't necessarily mean doing things quickly. It means ensuring you maximize the time you have and that how you structure your project is in line with the scheduling philosophy of the company.

A project organization study from *McKinsey* that used data from 1,500 different companies determined that only 52% of them felt that their time management matched the organization's priorities. It's quite a surprising number, but not when you consider how often projects end up behind schedule. A first-time manager would be susceptible to that, but you don't have to be if you take time management seriously.

This means creating detailed schedules for your team, delegating the tasks among them appropriately, and being aware of constraints that could slow the project down or throw you off schedule.

And lastly, if you aren't that used to communicating with people, that's an essential skill for good project management and something that you will have to get used to. You should aim to build rapport with every team member and stakeholder because the appropriate way to communicate will vary depending on the personality and their role in the project.

What I hope is clear to you after all of this is that running your first project is a big undertaking. Still, it doesn't have to be too intimidating if you go in with some preparation. Understanding the different kinds of methodology and the essential skills will give you a significant advantage.

So if you have your first project coming up soon, be sure to study up on all of these things and work to develop the skills so you can hit the ground running from day one.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening, and remember: keep building the best you.

Reading List:

[Article] Why is Project Management so Important to an Organization?, Ben Aston

[Article] What is Waterfall Methodology and How Do I Use It?, Leeron Hoory & Cassie Bottroff

[Article] Why Science-Driven Companies should Use Agile, Alessandro Di Fiore, Kendra West, Andrea Segnalini

[Article] Basic Project Management 101, F. John Reh

[Article] A Personal Approach to Organizational Time Management, Peter Bregman