Project Charter: align stakeholder expectations and enable project success

Projects are conceptualised in many different ways but they are all undertaken to create a lasting outcome (PMI, 2013, pp. 2,3); Most of the time, projects' requesting entities vary significantly and the way a project is outlined or described at its early stages is of pivotal importance for the project success. A project might be triggered by a simple source such as an email and in other cases the source could be a contract signed after a complex tendering procedure lasting for a long period of time. No matter the source or trigger, project managers have to confirm the project's justification and align all stakeholders' expectations including those of the operational stakeholders.

According to Miller and Oliver (2015), there are a number of critical strategies that the project manager and the team need to implement if they are to create engagement on their projects and, therefore, commitment to the project output (Miller & Oliver, 2015). Miller and Oliver (2015) propose proper implementation of project management processes right from the start of the project; especially those processes that identify and engage stakeholders. They argue that this will also determine the degree to which stakeholders commit to the project objective (Miller & Oliver, 2015). Formal and informal communication with all stakeholders, meetings with the key stakeholders, facilitated workshops and expert judgement are extremely useful but when the moment comes to initiate a project, and just before diving into detailed project planning, everyone should have the same vision as far as the project outcome is concerned. It is extremely important for the project manager that the stakeholders clearly understand what the project's objectives are, what the major constraints will be and any associated major risks. Providing these to the stakeholders and asking them to confirm their understanding is a proactive action that enhances the projects' success probabilities. This proactive action will help stakeholders see "the light at the end of the tunnel" and in the case that during meetings or workshops they failed to understand the project purpose for whatever reason, this action will clarify objectives and comfort their worries and anxieties, thus helping them to engage sooner and easier.

Also, research shows that having actively engaged executive sponsors is the top driver of project success (BCG, 2014), and that one out of three unsuccessful projects fails to meet goals due to poorly engaged sponsors. "Just as a project manager would do a kick-off meeting for a project, it's important to do a kick-off meeting for the project manager-sponsor relationship" (PMI, 2014).

One of the most important weapons of Project Managers to achieve all the above, is the Project Charter. The Project Charter provides the projects' justification and outlines the objectives, the constraints and risks of the project at minimum. It is created during the develop project charter process at the project's initiation stage. Beyond providing the description of the project, the Project Charter once completed and accepted by the sponsor and key stakeholders, it will formally authorize the existence of a project and the project manager with the relevant authority to apply organizational resources to project activities (PMI, 2013).

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The process of developing the Project Charter signalises the project start and when completed, sets the project boundaries, creates a formal record of the project, and most importantly, it is a direct way for senior management to formally accept and commit to the project (PMI, 2013, p. 66). The Project Charter should be authored by the sponsoring authority (PMI, 2013, p. 67); however, it would be extremely beneficial if the Project Manager and the team works with the sponsoring authority to create the Project Charter as this will help gain better insights and understanding of the project from the early stages.

Every project manager should demand the development of the Project Charter and actively seek for those resources that will enable its proper development. Such resources are the Project Statement of Work (SOW), any contractual document, agreements, the business case or feasibility study and any organisational asset that can provide relevant information (PMI, 2013). The project charter shouldn't be considered as complete until sign-off has been received from the project sponsor/s, senior management, and key stakeholders (Heldman & Mangano, 2009) and this is actually the way for the Project Manager to confirm that the document has been read by those signing it, that they agree with the contents, and are on board with the project (Heldman & Mangano, 2009, p. 48).

A sample content of a Project Charter is provided below but it should not be limited to only these sections as every project is unique and therefor it should be outlined according to its own characteristics.

- Identify project sponsor(s).
- Identify and document project deliverables (what is expected from the project).
- Identify and document project constraints (limitations).
- Identify any major related risks
- Determine project success criteria.
- Document project assumptions.
- Develop and analyse cost-benefits.

Finally the Project Charter and shouldn't be a lengthy. It should contain measurable objectives but at the same time it should be written in a simple language so that everyone understands it.

References

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