

# IT Project Management: Ten Rules for Enhancing the Human Element

By Kevin McGaffey and Rob Beckmann

Every organization is looking for keys to enhancing the Information Technology (IT) workplace—to integrate the IT team into the business through alignment and strategic planning, to make the IT team a key driver of change in the business, to make the IT team and its partners aware of the need to deliver business solutions on time and on budget, and to build an IT team that promotes achievement and accomplishments, and that delivers hard benefits back to the business.

IT project management is one of the most complex tasks for people and organizations to manage. It requires project managers to be expert jugglers in a dynamic environment where none of the project parameters stays static for any length of time. While educational institutions and certification organizations are fast at work trying to ensure that project managers have the skills and tools available to manage the process of project management, little is done to teach and mentor project managers on the key aspect of each and every project: people. It is people, after all, that are needed to do the tasks that make the project successful. Given the maze of challenges that IT organizations face in these times of increased complexity and pressures from business, one often overlooked area is the people who work in these organizations day-in and day-out, delivering on projects. Enhancing the

human element in your project is the fundamental key to success. Ensuring that you have a developed strategy of

“people management” in your project will put you on a solid foundation for a successful outcome.

In this article, we step back to take a look at our combined 56 years of experience in IT delivering hundreds of projects, and we assess and determine the lessons learned working in large complex IT organizations as employees, service providers, consultants, and trusted advisors to leading North American companies. We believe that there are patterns to successful performance by individuals and teams in projects, and would like to present ten rules for enhancing the “human element” of the IT team.

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RULES 10



## Rule # 1: Remove Obstacles to Team Performance

Some common obstacles to team performance are bureaucracy, politics, and unnecessary meetings. Your focus as project manager is to protect the team and ensure that they focus on the important work that delivers the results expected. Remember that, as project manager, you are the “CEO” of the team. In one project where I was in the role of senior project manager different senior executives would approach me asking if they could allocate tasks to project

team members that would take away from their full-time commitment. I had to demonstrate to these senior executives that even the smallest amount of time away would cause a distraction to meeting the project goal and objectives. They needed to understand that it was necessary for the project team members to be focused 100% of the time and that not even 90% or 95% of their attention would be sufficient. Once we communicated this, I believed that these executives understood and looked for alternative resources. However, if you find that this is a recurring problem, you need to escalate this to your program manager, to the steering committee, or to the senior executive in charge of the project.



### **Rule #2: Reward Individual and Team Performance Regularly**

Individual and team performance should be rewarded regularly throughout the life cycle of the project, and not just at its end. Make it a point to recognize individuals and the team at unexpected times throughout the project. Celebrating your team's success will keep people motivated and focused on the end goal. One practice that we have noticed that has worked successfully in the past is to allow people some extra "space" to take a personal day; another is giving a gift card for a family night out. Once, for a team member who had an elderly parent living with him, we provided some services so that the parent could be taken care of while the team member and his family went on vacation. Having this "break" from caregiving was tremendously important for this particular individual, and was seen by the rest of the team members as a compassionate initiative.



### **Rule #3: Play the Right Line Combinations**

Just like a coach in team sports, the project manager needs to recognize the flow of the game and play the right line combinations—to look ahead and put the right people together in situations where they are given the best chance of success. At the same time, you should challenge your team members with the opportunities that you present, which will help them to grow and have a positive experience. Provide the team with the right coaching, but leave them free to make mistakes, observing their course and providing positive feedback for course corrections. This will not only ensure that the team members think through the requirements, which will assist in building their confidence as individuals and as a team, but will also help you become more familiar with the team's capabilities and with the strengths and weaknesses of the individual members. Again, keep in

mind Rule #2 and allow each individual their "15 minutes of fame" in the scope of the project and be prepared to let everyone know about that person's accomplishments, no matter how small. Each small incremental step towards the end-game is critical.



### **Rule #4: Help Build the Right Work Environment**

Help build the right environment—both physical and cultural—for people to work in. The work environment should allow people to ignore noise and focus on the tasks at hand, overcome adversity, and thrive under pressure. This can involve a number of strategies, from locating the team away from the operational site, to integrating them within the chaos of the operational site, to providing a mixture of on-site and off-site activities, with appropriate war rooms and infrastructure for "24 x 7" communications. Common areas should be available for impromptu breakout problem-solving sessions where you can gather a small group and focus on solving a particular road-blocking issue in real-time, as soon as it occurs. Ensure that you have executive buy-in for the facility requirements prior to project initiation so that there are no unpleasant surprises later. From a cultural perspective, you need to build an open and transparent environment that is enjoyable for people to work in. The environment should be one in which they will be engaged, energized and enabled to deliver top-line results back to the project team. You can build this environment through the development of trusted relationships between you and your team members. .



### **Rule #5: Be Proactive**

Be proactive in addressing issues both internal and external to the project team. Recognize and attack problems early so that they are resolved to stakeholder satisfaction. No problem is too small to ignore, and it is almost always a mistake to assume that it will "work itself out" in time. As project manager, your primary job is to foresee problems and risks, resolve the problems, mitigate the risks, and sweep off the path so the team has a clear road ahead of them. You have been given a unique opportunity to sit at the front of the ship and see everything in front of you. Use that visibility to navigate around the "icebergs." One situation that I've witnessed is that of a project manager who became more focused on documenting the past than on thinking about the future. This person became so concerned with ensuring that status reports were completed, presentations prepared, and

documents filed in corporate directories that he missed the “train coming at him.”



### **Rule #6: Knowledge is More Important than Documentation**

The above scenario ties in perfectly with our next rule: Knowledge is more important than documentation. There should be no documentation for documentation’s sake. You need to encourage knowledge sharing between individuals and across teams. This can only really happen when the people are sitting face-to-face or in clear proximity of each other. Forget documents as a means of communicating; no one actually has time to read them, anyway. I know several project managers and leads that receive 300 to 600 e-mails each day; they simply do not have time to process all of them. Remember, your team will have to work with other teams to ensure success, and sharing knowledge is critical to this.



### **Rule #7: Over-communicate**

Over-communicate to everyone—this is the best way to make sure that people know at every stage what to expect from your project roadmap. If you have vendors involved with your internal team, communicate to them daily during critical project periods to ensure that everyone is in sync around the goals and objectives. If this requires a daily 8 a.m. phone call, then make that call.



### **Rule #8: The Stakeholder is Part of the Team**

The key business stakeholder is part of the team. The people representing stakeholder concerns should be made to feel that they are active participants on the project, and not just involved bystanders. That is, they should be contributing to real deliverables and to the day-to-day execution of the project as much as possible. Active participation from one or two key representatives of the business is always seen as a harbinger of project success. This involvement in the project team makes it much easier for stakeholders to communicate their vision of the system to the other team members and to take ownership of the project outcomes.



### **Rule #9: The Team is Part of the Planning Process**

As a project manager you need to make your team an integral part of the planning process to gain

their buy-in for the estimation process and individual task estimates. Respect their estimates and they will feel that their input is valued. You will have fewer difficulties in holding people accountable to estimates they have had input into and this becomes another way to build trusted relationships between you and your team members.



### **Rule #10: Be Positive**

Be consistently positive in your attitude towards the project, your team, key stakeholders, and executive management. Optimism rubs off on people; if others see that you are positive in your actions, then morale will build and people will begin to see that it is possible. (Think of the effectiveness of the now-famous, presidential campaign slogan “YES, WE CAN!”).

## **Conclusion**

It would be difficult to adopt all ten rules in your organization, and we are not proposing that you do so. However, implementing even a few of these rules in your projects will, we believe, enhance the “human element” of the IT organization. The people working in the context of project management that follows these rules would begin to feel better about their contributions, leading to an increase team performance and accountability. Ultimately, this will ensure that your project crosses the finish line successfully and that the project team achieves a sense of fulfillment.

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