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MAKING GOOD TEAM MEMBER ASSIGNMENTS

By Dick Billows, PMP GCA

At 4pm.com, we spend a lot of time teaching clients and students to manage projects with achievements and not fall into what we call the "Activity Trap." PMs fall into this trap when their project plan is nothing but a "to do" list of features, good ideas and a laundry list of requirements. These PM's projects fail most of the time - finishing late, over budget and producing little of value because of the double-curse of the activity trap:

- The can't control scope because their scope definition is vague at best
- They make lousy assignments to their team members who must guess at what's expected of them

PMs who learn to drive projects with measured achievements have neither of those problems and can actually control scope and have happy users or customers. Their team members don't have to worry about the blame game because what's expected is crystal clear before they start work.

With activities, we define what we want team members to do. It's like telling a waiter in a restaurant "Bring me food." Odds are that the end result will not live up to your expectations. It's even possible, that the waiter will deliver a seven-course meal when all you wanted was a burger. Sponsors often lead PMs into the activity trap by giving the PM an activity list, which dooms the whole effort.

The key flaw in an activity assignment is that we do not communicate a clear end result expectation. As a result, we cannot gain commitment to the assignment, nor can we reasonably dole out consequences for good or bad performance. Aside from some vague and arguable expectations about what "bring me food" means, we set no performance standard to measure against. When we use activities with professionals the results just cost more.

If, on the other hand, we assign the waiter an achievement like "Please bring me the Buffalo steak, medium rare with mushrooms and a side of salad with blue cheese," we have the potential for better performance. We have made the end result expectation clear and have an opportunity to develop some commitment to it. Last, if those results are not delivered, rewards or punishments have a much better chance of being perceived as fair because the standard was clear.

Let's now consider an example with a professional project team member. We see lots of project plans with activities like, "Train the customer service reps." Should a PM be surprised when the reps can't follow the new process or use the new system we are installing? No. The PM never made the end result clear and deserves what he or she gets.

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With an achievement assignment the trainer would have accountability for, “90% of the reps can answer the top 15 customer inquiries in less than 45 seconds each.” When the PM makes this assignment, the trainer knows what’s expected.

Where did that achievement come from? From the decomposition of a scope that was also a measurable business outcome (see our Achievement-driven Project Management Methodology). As the name implies, measured achievements are a key to our Achievement-driven Project Management. The methodology teaches you to define a measurable scope with a sponsor or client and then decompose it down to verifiable assignments for your team. This pays important dividends in estimating, tracking and managing projects to their successful ends. When we assign the team member an achievement, we have a much easier time of clarifying expectations, gaining commitment and fairly doling out rewards or consequences based on actual performance.

SUMMARY

Learn the planning and estimating techniques you need for successful projects in our [personal on-line training courses](#) and also consider our [PM certification programs](#). You’ll work directly with an expert PM to master proven skills of effective project management and a step-by-step methodology.

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