

Project Management Questions:

Responses from Rob Black, Director of Program Management, Cannon Equipment Inc.

March 24, 2005

1. How did you get into project management?
I became a Program Manager through a sequence of job assignments of increasing scope, complexity, and budget responsibility. My initial assignments were very simple tasks with specific deadlines involving minimal resources outside my immediate work group. My current assignments involve the participation of people at multiple locations, are highly complex, and contribute a significant percentage of revenue to the company.
2. Did you have any training or special talents or experiences that qualified you for the job?
An effective Project Manager needs to be well organized, needs to think logically (sequence of process steps, if-then . . . , etc.), and must communicate effectively (oral and written). A program manager who understands the technical aspects of the “deliverable” has an advantage (i.e. electrical engineering background managing a circuit board project). Experience with the customer, the product being delivered, suppliers, and the competitors are also helpful as a Program Manager. My training consisted of “on-the-job” mentoring from a senior Project Leader, after-hours continuing education, company sponsored “during” and “after” work-hours classroom/workshop training.
3. Are you certified or have you thought about becoming certified as a PMP?
I am a member of the Program Management Institute and preparing to take the Program Management Professionals certification test in 2005.
4. What do you feel is the most important thing you do as a project manager? On what task do you spend the most time each day?
 - (a) The most important thing as a Project Management is to establish clear objectives/goals that the team understands, supports, and accepts (takes personal ownership in). This takes a lot of effort at the beginning of a project, but once the objectives are defined, little if any additional work on my part is required.
 - (b) The next most important responsibility is to facilitate communication between functions, locations, departments. This is where I spend the majority of my workday - scheduling meetings to make (or communicate) decisions, recapping meetings/decisions, problem solving, and reporting status.
5. What are some of the challenges that you face on a daily basis?
Changing customer requirements, conflicting organizational priorities, solving unforeseen problems, and getting resources assigned to projects when they are needed, as a few examples of challenges faced by Program Managements each day

6. Please describe any notable successes and failures you've had on projects. What did you learn from those experiences?
I recently led a complex manufacturing restructuring project. The project involved transferring 110,000 square feet of electronics manufacturing/assembly operations from one location and consolidating it into another facility. The project was completed on time and within the project budget. The project was successful because we were able to get the "sending" and "receiving" locations to work together. The overall detailed plan for the transfer was put together by a joint team consisting of participants from both locations. The plan was realistic, practical, balanced the needs of each location and our customers, and worked.
7. What are some of the tools, software or otherwise, that you use, and what is your opinion of those tools?
 - (a) Meeting Agenda. I don't call a meeting without a meeting agenda. An effective meeting requires preparation by the Project Leader ahead of time to make sure the right people participate, that they are given the information needed before the meeting, and that you have a clear objective/expected outcome of the meeting.
 - (b) Action Register. Use Action Registers or meeting recaps to document decisions and task assignments (*who* are doing, *what*, *when*). You need to hold people accountable/responsible for their actions.
 - (c) Project Charter. More complex projects need a Project Charter. The charted defines project purpose, objectives/goals, scope, team assignments, etc.
 - (d) Project Plan. Most programs need an overall Project Plan or Schedule – I typically use a Gantt Chart (MS Project or MS Excel)
8. What do you enjoy most and what do you like least about being a project manager?
 - (a) Enjoyed Most – I enjoy working cross-functionally across the organization, the sense of accomplishment when a program is executed well, and the recognition that my contributions improve the companies financial "bottom-line"
 - (b) Enjoyed Least – dealing with difficult people/personalities.
9. What are some steps a project manager can take to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of a team?
 - (a) Make sure the team is clear on objectives/goals
 - (b) Make sure the team "buys into" or has ownership on the solution/plan
 - (c) Make sure the team is given resources needed to execute the plan
 - (d) Make sure are team members participate
 - (e) Make sure contributors are recognized for their efforts.
10. How does a new project manager gain the respect and loyalty of team members?
Can you share any examples of situations you faced related to this topic?
The best ways for a project manager to gain respect and loyalty of team members is to treat members of the team with respect, be truthful, and conduct business with integrity. The program manager should recognize and reward team members

for their contributions. The program manager should set high personal standards for his/her own job performance – because the Program Manager, knowingly or unknowingly, sets an example for the team; and establishes the team “norms”. I once worked for a Program Manager who took personal credit for the results delivered by our team, and did not give anyone on the team any credit for their contributions. Needless to say, no one was excited about working on this Program Manager’s next project.

11. What suggestions do you have for working with sponsors and senior managers?
Can you share any examples of situations you faced related to this topic?
Communicate regularly. Communicate succinctly. Be honest in your communications. Have the courage to report both bad news and good news. Communicate bad news without delay (since executives want to be the first to know about a problem, not the last), but be prepared with some options. During my career there have been instances when projects were delayed, production lines shutdown, and products recalled (only once -- thankfully), but in each case, senior management was always supportive, and long as I took the time to explain the situation, present the alternatives, make a thoughtful recommendation, and communicate frequently.

12. Do you have any suggestions for future project managers, such as any specific preparations they should make, skills they should learn, etc?
Formal training on Project Management, planning, interpersonal skills, etc. is a great starting point. But the best thing to do is find a mentor – someone you can learn from by example, someone you can discuss issues with, someone that will give you honest feedback.