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## Build Realistic Plans

Knowing how to create plans that incorporate realistic expectations and that accurately estimate the resources and time available and the effort involved is part of a manager's responsibility. Without a manager who has a good sense of how to plan, when to plan, and what steps to plan for—and who knows the common pitfalls of failed planning—work groups can end up being chaotic and unproductive.

Effective planning starts with understanding your company's strategic vision and goals, and how your unit relates to accomplishing those goals. By considering the various factors involved in planning and taking the time to make sure you have covered them, you'll be able to keep projects moving smoothly and successfully toward completion. You'll also be able to make sure your direct reports are using successful planning strategies for their projects.

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**In this chapter, we will cover the following areas:**

- ▶ Understand your organization's strategic vision
- ▶ Translate business strategies into clear objectives and tactics
- ▶ Identify action steps needed to accomplish team or work group objectives
- ▶ Identify and obtain resources needed to accomplish team or work group objectives
- ▶ Involve others in planning
- ▶ Integrate planning efforts across work units
- ▶ Establish clear, realistic time lines for accomplishing goals
- ▶ Identify risks and assumptions in plans, anticipate problems, and plan for contingencies



## Understand your organization's strategic vision

Ask people to explain the organization's strategic goals. Listen for depth of understanding. Ask what role they and their groups have in accomplishing the goals.

Effective planning requires an understanding of the organization's vision and goals, the strategies chosen to accomplish the goals, and the business processes necessary to achieve the goals. This understanding enables leaders and teams to set work unit goals, strategies, and plans that support the vision. To better understand your organization's strategic vision and link it to your team's work, consider the following steps:

- ▶ First, articulate your organization's vision and strategic direction.
  - ▷ What are the organization's vision and goals?
  - ▷ What is the organization's sustainable advantage over its competitors?
  - ▷ Which business processes are critical to the success of the strategies and vision?
  - ▷ What role do you play or does your team play in the success of the organization?
- ▶ Next, if you cannot answer these questions, ask for help from your manager or coach.
- ▶ Finally, communicate this information to those you supervise so that they understand the organization's direction. They will need this information to set their own goals and guide their teams.

## Translate business strategies into clear objectives and tactics

Detailed action plans help you translate business strategies into clear objectives and action plans for your work unit or team. Plans also help you focus department or team output to best serve the organization's needs and help you stay in touch with the big picture when day-to-day details threaten to cloud the larger goals. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Clarify the role you and your team(s) play in achieving the organization's goals by identifying the business processes for which you are accountable and determining what your part of the organization must do to achieve these goals. Include objectives for how to improve the business processes necessary for success.



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*Review a team's operational plan, focusing on the link between the plan and business strategies. Question things that are not linked to business strategies.*

- ▶ Identify the primary constraints or barriers to achieving the goals. Plan what you will do to address them. This is important because this is where you are most vulnerable.
- ▶ Ask individuals and teams to list their objectives and plans. Give them a template to use to ensure that all pertinent components are addressed.
- ▶ Review these individual and team objectives and plans to ensure that they are compatible with and support the organization's strategy.
- ▶ Develop objective measures of success that will tell you when you have achieved an objective or goal.
- ▶ Put all of this information into a format that is clear, accessible, and easy to update.
- ▶ Be flexible, and be prepared to change your tactics if internal or external factors alter the company's strategic direction.

## Identify action steps needed to accomplish team or work group objectives

▼  
*Ask people to note what their plans depend upon. What action steps need to get done in sequence?*

Action steps help you plot the critical path for your projects. If you don't identify specific action steps, you'll get stuck, people will be confused, and your strategies and objectives will fall by the wayside. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Understand how your work group supports the broader strategy of your organization. Learn why the strategy was chosen and whether there are any guidelines on how people should pursue it.
- ▶ Set goals and determine strategies and tactics to achieve the goals. Next, put together action plans that detail the steps needed to accomplish the plan and achieve goals.
- ▶ Ask a series of questions to organize your thoughts:
  - ▷ What needs to be accomplished? What is the desired result?
  - ▷ What are the main tasks?
  - ▷ What specific action steps are required for each main task?
  - ▷ Who will be held accountable for each step?



- ▷ How much time will each task take?
- ▷ Which tasks need to be done in sequence? Which tasks can be done out of sequence?
- ▷ Which tasks can be done simultaneously?
- ▷ Which resources will be required? How will you secure the resources?
- ▷ How will you measure success?
- ▶ Identify internal and external constraints to carrying out your objectives and tactics.
- ▶ Meet with colleagues who are skilled in translating objectives into specific action steps. Ask them to describe the process they use to develop action steps and tactics. Incorporate their techniques into your planning.

### Identify and obtain resources needed to accomplish team or work group objectives

When you implement team or work group objectives, you need to have the right people in the right place at the right time. To make realistic estimates of budget, staff, and other resources, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Thoroughly define the scope of the project. Make sure you identify the budget, goals, objectives, and desired results, along with the processes needed to accomplish them.
- ▶ Make a list of all the resources in your area, and those that you have access to in other areas of the organization. Include as many types of resources as you can, from capital equipment and budgets to administrative support and individual or group expertise. This will help you maximize your options.
- ▶ For each resource, note when it will be needed, the different ways it can be obtained, and what acceptable substitutes exist. If you haven't worked on this type of project before, review the resources that were required on a similar initiative.
- ▶ Identify potential resources before you need them. For example, develop contacts with people in your organization. Learn about

*Identify people who accurately predict needed resources. How do they consistently estimate what it takes to get a job done?*



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their areas of expertise, both on and off the job. When you need help, they may be able to help you or refer you to specialists outside your organization.

- ▶ When you are preparing estimates for staffing needs, consider the skill levels of the individuals who will work on your project and adjust time and cost appropriately. Also look for cross-training opportunities to make use of resources from other areas of the organization.
- ▶ When you work with a team, challenge them to use resources in the most efficient way possible.
- ▶ Check with colleagues, mentors, and your manager to see if you requested and obtained the correct resources. Their feedback will help you detect any gaps in your plans or flaws in your approach. It will also reinforce what you are doing well.
- ▶ Establish a way to track the productivity of various resources. This will enable you to estimate your resource needs more accurately on future projects.

## Involve others in planning



Deciding when and how to involve people is a leadership skill that should always be part of the planning process. When you are making plans, involve the people, teams, and constituencies that care about the outcome, the plan, or the process. Consider the following suggestions for involving others in your planning:

- ▶ Identify the business processes involved in accomplishing the goal and the process owners for each part of the process. Typically, these people or their representatives should be included in the planning.
- ▶ Recognize that most planning processes need to include the people and teams who are affected.
- ▶ Use a team approach to planning in complex situations where results are critical, many people are involved, and it is challenging to construct the plan.

*Ask people to identify who should be consulted or involved in planning a specific initiative. Verify that they included the appropriate people.*



- ▶ Balance the need for involvement with the need for action and speed. Communicate the need for speed. Set time limits on the planning process.
- ▶ Train people in team processes so that team planning will go more quickly and smoothly.
- ▶ Include vendors and suppliers when their commitments are necessary and cannot be assumed—for example, when the project requires that new technology from a sole supplier be ready on time.

### Integrate planning efforts across work units

*Identify which parts of the plan are dependent on other departments and functions and ask them for input.*

Integrating planning efforts across work units is easier said than done, but absolutely essential. It takes a concerted effort to get people together, create a workable plan, and sort through competing priorities. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Realize that your area is not an island. Make a habit of involving others in your planning efforts. Take into account the people on your team, other teams in the organization, your customers, and your suppliers.
- ▶ Determine the support and integration you will need from other work groups. Bring these groups into the planning process early to take advantage of their expertise and enlist their cooperation.
- ▶ Even when you do not see a direct connection between your proposed plan and other work units, review your plan from their perspectives to determine if they might see a relationship. Send a copy of your plans to them; err on the side of communicating too much rather than too little.
- ▶ For each plan, list the key stakeholders, the business processes involved, and the owner of each process. Determine how each person on the list can be involved. Decide whether each person should:
  - ▷ Be an active planner.
  - ▷ Serve as an information resource or subject-matter expert.
  - ▷ Review the plan.
  - ▷ Receive communications and updates.



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- ▶ When one of your direct reports plans a project, ask how the plan affects other work units and what conversations the person has had with his or her coworkers in those areas. These questions will reinforce your expectation regarding integrated efforts.
- ▶ Bring cross-functional teams together to review plans:
  - ▷ Does each group understand its role and responsibilities in the plan?
  - ▷ Are handoffs and checkpoints clear?
  - ▷ Do you have adequate communication plans?
  - ▷ Does everyone feel involved and included?
- ▶ Designate liaison people to help you effectively plan across work units. For example, product managers or customer representatives could facilitate and coordinate planning efforts for particular products, clients, or projects.
- ▶ Analyze and address barriers to collaboration. Set a clear expectation that people and teams will work together cooperatively.
- ▶ Realize that coordinating efforts among locations will require greater effort, especially when you are working in multiple countries and time zones. Talk with people who have more experience in this area about how they made global teams work.

### Establish clear, realistic time lines for accomplishing goals

▼ Unrealistic time lines can create more problems than they solve. For example, an impossible schedule set by one work unit can affect the schedules of many other groups, causing inefficient use of resources, delayed products, and a general sense that things are out of control. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ When you're leading a project, estimate the length of time each phase will take. Make a chart that lists the time needed for each phase. This will give you a graphic depiction of the total time required.
- ▶ Compare your timetable to the time required on similar assignments that are now complete. Is your plan realistic? Where should you build in extra time? Where can you cut time?



*As you look at plans, check for an appropriate balance between involving people in the process and completing a plan in a reasonable amount of time.*

- ▶ Look for phases of the project or assignment that are time-dependent on other phases. These areas of interdependence could turn into bottlenecks.
- ▶ When you have a proposed time line, ask your team or a trusted peer to challenge your assumptions and identify potential problems with the schedule. Address any issues you overlooked.
- ▶ Review your timetable with people who will be working on the project. With their input, set final deadlines for each action step. Be sure that the due dates are clear and agreed upon.
- ▶ Consider involving your customers and/or suppliers in the planning process. Their input can help you develop realistic time lines. Also, you will be more likely to gain their commitment to the process.

### **Identify risks and assumptions in plans, anticipate problems, and plan for contingencies**

Life doesn't always follow a project plan. If you question assumptions, anticipate risks, and develop contingency plans, you can avoid many problems and mitigate others when they occur. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Identify the assumptions in your plans and test their accuracy. For example, your plan may depend on the assumption that people on your team have the necessary expertise. If that assumption is wrong, the plan will encounter problems, such as missed deadlines and uncertainty over how to handle unexpected issues.
- ▶ After a plan is drafted, brainstorm with your team about what could go wrong. Make a list of the most likely problems and how you will handle them if they occur.
- ▶ To identify risks on your projects, use the following process:
  1. Determine the critical path of the project. List all the tasks and decision points.
  2. Analyze each component to detect areas of risk. For example:
    - ▷ You might not have enough information to make a decision.



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- ▷ It might take extra time for people to learn a new technical procedure.
  - ▷ A service group that you use might experience staffing problems.
  - ▷ You might lose a key resource at a critical time.
3. Categorize potential problems into high- and low-risk areas. Consider how likely it is that each problem will occur and how damaging it would be.
  4. Prepare several possible approaches for dealing with likely problems.
  5. Incorporate safety factors for high-risk areas:
    - ▷ Allocate more time and/or funds to these phases.
    - ▷ Introduce tough control methods.
    - ▷ Set up a communication process so people hear about problems immediately and can address them promptly.

*Review the person's action plans. Ask about risks in the plans, and add your own thoughts.*