WHEN IS A DAY WORTH MORE THAN A DAY?

Ever notice how a day at the end of a project seems more valuable than a day at the beginning? We hardly notice a slip of a day (or even a week) at the beginning of a year-long project, but as the ship date nears, every day seems precious and any slip sounds off warning bells. It's often said that we slip projects a day at a time. If this is the case – and let me assure you from long experience that it is – then a day at the beginning of a project should be viewed just as valuable as a day near the end.

Actually, these early days are often more valuable than any later period since it is during this time that the project is planned. Numerous studies have shown that a good project plan is the single most significant factor in determining a positive outcome for a project.

Momentum often gathers slowly during the early phases. This can lead to what I call "Early Project Drift". The team wonders: Is the project underway? How would anyone know it? Is there a management focus? If so, where? Worse yet, the team isn't even aware the project is actually started, so team members work on other, pressing, tasks…….See

AVOID EARLY PROJECT DRIFT BY STARTING OFF WITH A BANG - AND A GOAL

What can be done to improve the "slow startup" situation? One factor is certain, there is very little focus on the project at this time, so there must be some method introduced to get focus on the project. Some practical ideas are:

1. Get Early Management "Sponsorship" - Make sure you get a solid commitment from management. Probably the most important management commitment is a clear business objective that can be turned into clear development goals for the project. Another key commitment is resources – people, space, money and equipment -- to make the project successful. Don't kick off a project (and start the clock running) until you have negotiated these commitments.

2. Have an Explicit, Written, "Project Team Process" - This written process should especially include what is appropriate early in a project, including the formal definition of the roles of the project leader during this time.

3. Rev Up Yourself and "Core" Team Early - This requires the use of self-motivational and public relations skills.

Many technically-oriented project managers don't use these approaches because they consider them disingenuous. But, without some formal acknowledgment, the project can wander about and not get started properly. This is especially true for development projects that are not as glamorous - such as derivative designs. New platform designs often get more management attention automatically.

This is where such items as a good, viable, focused initial plan and business case can be combined with project "T" shirts, mugs, pens, etc. These are presented to core team members to help them to identify with the overall project name and business goals. It could also include a special kick off lunch, beer bust, or other approach. The goal is to create a memorable situation, that is different from the normal everyday experience for the "core" team that is needed to move the project forward.

4. Hold a Team Kickoff Meeting - Nothing beats a good, formal, kickoff meeting to get the entire team to focus on a project. Often, this can be combined with the previous suggestion in #2 above, but the meeting now involves the wider team. It usually can include a formal portion where planning and initial design can begin. It is often valuable to hold these meetings offsite, to really create a focus on the project, free of distractions.

5. Set an "Early - On", Very Visible, Project Milestone - A good one would be the completion of such items as the specification, system block diagram, major code flow charts, user interface document, the formal plan, etc. This is a good place to schedule the earliest design and management reviews.

These management reviews might be broken down into two parts: the work up to the planning stage and the second after planning is complete. Ensure all critical team members, the critical functional groups outside engineering, and the project sponsor attend these meetings. It can be very ineffective if all parties do not attend these meetings. This will pick up "holes" in the design, plan, or testing.

This article was an expansion of the first of our "12 Best Strategies for Keeping Engineering Projects on Track". For more information on the "12 Best Strategies", visit www.angotti.com/12strat.html.