

## Death at Kickoff

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Most of us have been there, those long meetings intended on starting a new effort off “on the right foot”. After the first hour either our eyes have glazed over because the technical resources are talking about issues outside our comfort zone, or we are so mired in tangential disagreements that no one can remember why the meeting was called in the first place. Yet, somewhere along the way most project managers are taught every project must have a kickoff meeting. In an era where we are being asked to do so much with so little does it really make sense to spend time in yet another meeting?

The answer to this question is a highly qualified yes. Kickoff meetings can be a valuable resource to ensure the success of any initiative, but only when done the correct way with well managed expectations. When not done correctly or when expectations are not managed well the kickoff simply confirms the project as another poorly run effort destined for failure. So how do you ensure the kickoffs held within your organization add value rather than ensure failure?

The first, and perhaps most important question that must be answered is why hold a kickoff meeting in the first place? This question is critical because it forms the primary measure of success. Once the primary purpose of the kickoff has been determined, measurements of the results against the ability to achieve those results must be established. So why do most project managers believe they must hold kickoff meetings? In most cases, project managers hold kickoff meetings because they believe they are critical to getting the project team on the same page. Unfortunately, this purpose is incomplete. Successful project managers have learned the real purpose of a kickoff is to ensure the stakeholders, and not just the team, have a consistent vision of the project goals. Unfortunately, when leaders limit their vision of the kickoff to the project team they do nothing but ensure failure.

Leaders who assume the purpose of the kickoff is to get the project team on the same page fail because of one major assumption. When a project manager targets the project team as the primary audience of the kickoff they are assuming the primary stakeholders already know exactly what they want. In other words, the level of detail known about the project is sufficient for the team to begin work. Sadly, this is rarely the case. In fact, the only time complete information ever exists on a project is the day the project is completed. A well run kickoff meeting should help the project leader obtain a consistent vision from all the stakeholders with regard to the business need and justification. It should also allow the leader to see if there is strong agreement or disagreement amongst the stakeholders, and if one or more of the stakeholders is dominant within the group. The kickoff should rarely, if ever, be about the technical solution.

To achieve these objectives there are some simple rules every leader should follow:

1. The project sponsor who is the person paying for the project always starts the kickoff. Do not accept a stand-in. The sponsor only needs to be there for the first ten minutes. If the sponsor is too busy to show up for ten minutes think about how much support they will offer when the project runs into trouble.

2. The focus of the meeting is the stakeholders. Technical resources should only be in the room if they can listen. Resources who tend to dominate the conversation must be carefully managed.
3. The best time to hold a kickoff is 9:00 AM. Never hold a kickoff right before or right after lunch. It is impossible to keep everyone's focus.
4. Target 60 minutes as the meeting length, and never go longer than 90 minutes. Meetings that go longer than 90 minutes show disorganization, will degenerate into side conversations, and fail to get the correct people in the room.
5. Always serve food. Even people you don't want will show up when food is involved.
6. Most importantly, have fun! People want to be involved in fun, exciting, sexy projects. The project manager only gets one chance to make a first impression.

A well run kickoff meeting begins with the project sponsor introducing themselves and the project to all the stakeholders. This introduction should include a description of the business need and why a solution is needed. At this point, discussions of the technical solution should be avoided unless the solution has already been contracted and then it should be mentioned as a constraint. The sponsor should also describe any constraints and assumptions. Most importantly, the sponsor should describe the quantitative measures of success that will be used to evaluate the project once completed. Finally, the sponsor should introduce the project manager and shake their hand. The handshake is important for all the people in the room because it provides a visible physical transfer of authority from the sponsor to the project manager.

Once the project manager has been introduced they lead the rest of the kickoff. At this point, everyone in the room has just heard the sponsor's vision of the project. It is important to confirm that everyone received the same message. There are a number of ways to obtain this confirmation such as using a Vision Box or playing some sort of game. All of these are acceptable. However, do not simply ask a yes or no question for confirmation. You will not get a valid response. Upon confirming everyone understood the sponsor's vision the team can develop a work breakdown structure (WBS) for the product or service of the project by using Displayed Thinking. The final goal of the meeting is to walk out of the room with a well formed WBS.

If you follow these simple rules for a kickoff you too can avoid death by kickoff.