

How to Describe a Great Steering Committee in One Word: Accountability

Written by Andrew Miller

Andrew Miller's Monthly Blog

I am sure that we have all been on projects that have reported to Steering Committees, probably most of us on more than one project like that. So what makes a good steering committee? Firstly, we need to remember the purpose of a steering committee. It is not to provide operational support; it is not to provide daily advice. It is to provide strategic direction for the project and the organization, and to act as an escalation point for decision-making.

Of course, the make-up of the steering committee is important. You want a solid mix of Finance, HR and Operations, complementary personalities, and a strong chair. It is also important to ensure that there is an even make-up of representatives, if the project encompasses multiple organizations. It is even important that the steering committee meet regularly. However, it is most important that the steering committee has accountability for the success of the project. This does not mean that they are responsible for tracking the daily progress of the project, but it does mean that they will do whatever they can to support and ensure its success.

How can we ensure steering committee accountability? Firstly, we need to ensure that the steering committee has a direct line to the project team, so that information is passed accurately back and forth. I think it is imperative that your project manager be a member of the steering committee in order to hear the discussions and decision-making process, and to take that back to the daily management of the project. It will make it that much easier for the PM to make the steering committee's vision come true. Secondly, steering committee members should have something for which they are responsible. That can be in the form of a particular area of the project (finance, operations, HR, etc.) or it can be a particular phase of the project. This responsibility ensures two things: that most of the major project ideas are reviewed by a steering committee member before being presented to the other members; and that the Steering Committee member update his or her peers, giving the ideas and the updates immediate credibility.

I realize that this adds workload onto people who are already busy enough, but it is a sure way to increase the likelihood of success on a project.

Andrew Miller is President of ACM Consulting Inc. (www.acmconsulting.ca), a company that provides supply chain and project management solutions. Andrew is PMP certified and has led a variety of clients through complex systems implementations and organizational changes. He is an Instructor of the Procurement and Contracting course, part of the Masters Certificate in Project Management program through the Schulich School of Business Executive Education Centre (SEEC) in Toronto. Andrew has an International MBA from the Schulich School of Business with majors in Logistics and Marketing. He can be reached at andrew@acmconsulting.ca.