

**Building A Solid Project Foundation**  
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Project managers face the daunting challenge of defining, planning, and managing projects in complex work environments. Project stakeholders often send conflicting signals as to the importance and benefit of the project. Project managers need a way to navigate these waters so that the project progresses and “customers” (those using the project’s results) receive maximum value at each project phase. Three key elements form the foundation of a project – the underpinnings from which a project can be successfully managed. The elements are 1) a common understanding of purpose, 2) executive support, and 3) a sense of urgency about the project. Through understanding these critical components, project managers and team members can quickly cut through the morass of stakeholder issues to identify and resolve problems that could jeopardize the project. Consider the following factors:

1. **A common understanding of purpose.** Stakeholder alignment is the underlying theme. Project managers are usually concerned with defining deliverables and scope. Stakeholders want to know how those deliverables will coalesce into their desired business outcomes and benefits. How long before those business benefits are realized and what is the cost? In the absence of a common understanding of the project’s purpose, stakeholders will develop and communicate their own versions that are often in conflict with each other. Project teams can develop simple messages that describe the purpose of the project and how it links with the big picture. For example, “The project will result in decreased processing time for medical claims. This will increase processing capacity and increase staff time available for other critical work.” Stakeholders identify with business outcomes. Using business terms and linking the project to a known problem or opportunity will help align the stakeholders under a common understanding of the project’s purpose.
2. **Executive commitment.** An executive sponsor must visibly support or every major project. Commitment is best demonstrated through actions like securing funding and resources, advocating to other executives, setting priorities, and resolving issues. A project assigns authority to the project manager to use resources beyond their usual scope of control for the purposes of completing the project. This authority is derived from an executive, so in the absence of demonstrable executive commitment, the project will often fail because there is no legitimate decision maker driving the project. Executives sometimes do not know how to display commitment for the project and do not understand their role in the project. The project manager can help by providing specific behaviors and direction that will demonstrate project commitment.
3. **A Shared sense of urgency.** Project stakeholders should display a sense of urgency about completing the project. Not necessarily life–and–death, but urgency denotes the underlying resolve and commitment for completing the project. Not all projects are the top priority, and certainly a five-year effort presents problems on the urgency front. However the project was originated to solve a business problem and if that problem is real and compelling, it should translate into a sense of urgency from the stakeholders. Although stakeholders will probably vary in their degree of commitment, a critical mass is required to proceed with the project.

Experienced project managers know that projects often result in compromise. For example, deliverables are often sacrificed for lower costs or cost is often sacrificed to meet a completion date. These tradeoffs are the very business of managing projects. Caution is recommended when seemingly typical project tradeoffs reveal a deeper chasm between stakeholders. It may be worthwhile to revisit these project components with your stakeholders to be sure that any shifts in project direction do not fracture the foundation. What can we, as professionals, do with this information? The table below provides guidance in overcoming common challenges associated with your project foundation.

Foundation Element	Signs and Symptoms of Problems	How to correct
A common understanding of purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The same words have different meanings (e.g., “requirements”).</li> <li>• Stakeholders identify disparate outcomes.</li> <li>• No defined, documented scope.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete or validate a Statement of Work.</li> <li>• Clarify key concepts and words.</li> <li>• Validate with stakeholders the project deliverables and long-term outcomes.</li> </ul>
Executive commitment to the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not speak “on message”.</li> <li>• Does not deliver on commitments.</li> <li>• Fails to resolve conflicts.</li> <li>• Either ignores the project or micro-manages.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand executive motives and try to accommodate.</li> <li>• Provide a discrete set of responsibilities for the executive to fulfill.</li> <li>• Build and maintain an effective working relationship.</li> </ul>
A shared sense of urgency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of focus and energy for the project.</li> <li>• Priority of the project is questioned.</li> <li>• Stakeholders don’t commit resources.</li> <li>• No clear champions for the project emerge.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate how the project addresses current business needs.</li> <li>• Define the benefits in terms of the problem or opportunity.</li> <li>• Set short term goals.</li> </ul>

From externally managed projects all the way to the most humble of client-managed efforts, using a common-sense approach to managing the foundation of your project will drastically improve the chances of success. Good luck!

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