
Mastering Projects Series
Glance Management

Just yesterday, the status reports from your most critical project indicated that everything was OK. The milestone tracking charts and earned value metrics showed a project that was gloriously on schedule. This morning, out of the blue, a key team member gave you the horrible news that a “surprise” problem will cause a big slip in the key milestone due next week. After investigating, you found that the programmer working on the problem module has been worried about a potential problem for weeks.

How did this surprise happen? Why didn’t your formal project monitoring methods give you enough early warning to head off the problem? Unfortunately, this happens more often than it should, especially on projects that are complex, fast changing, or pushing the boundaries of what the team has done before.

Such projects are often too fluid, with too many nuances, for tried-and-true written and formal monitoring methods like status reports, milestone analysis, and earned value to show a complete picture. To avoid nasty surprises, project managers must supplement these formal monitoring techniques with informal monitoring.

Glance management techniques are a good way to do this because they help you informally and periodically sample what is going on in your project. For complex, rapidly changing projects, they surface information from the front lines that would never come through on status reports. Here are some helpful glance management techniques.

Make Time

Make regular time in your schedule for frequent, casual interactions with the project team and key stakeholders. Frequent and casual are key words here. People shouldn’t feel that you’re grilling them at a monthly scheduled interrogation.

Someone once told a story that makes the point. An ambitious junior manager wanted to move rapidly up the career ladder at his company, so he set out to investigate what the most successful managers did differently. To his surprise, he observed that a big factor was where the manager ate lunch. The most successful managers made a point of eating with project team members who worked in the trenches. The less successful managers ate at their desks or with other managers. Trying this himself, he was amazed at how much valuable project information he learned before it ever reached him in status reports. Whether or not this story is true, the point hits home: take the time for casual, unscripted interactions.

Break the Hierarchy

Hold “skip level” one-on-one meetings. These are regularly scheduled meetings with people who are not your direct reports or not directly on your project team. For

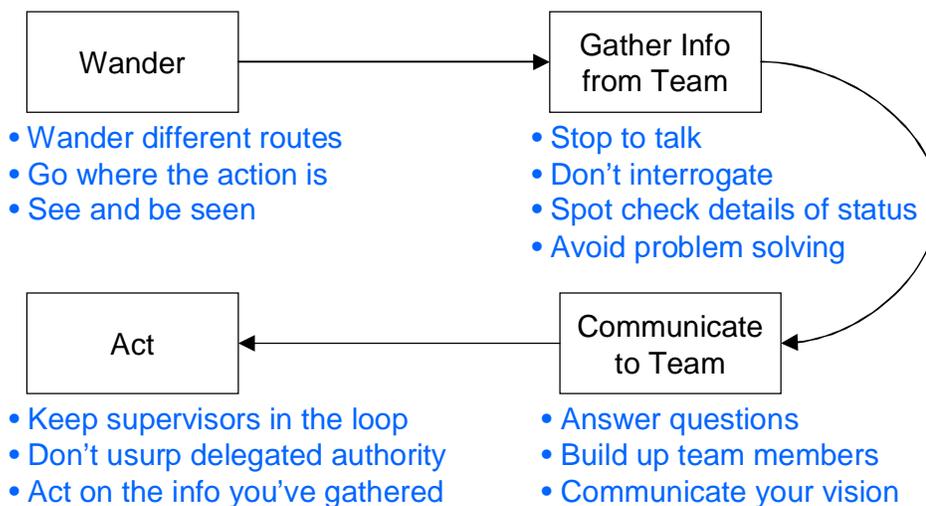
example, identify and meet with key stakeholders, sponsors, internal customers, or project workers that you don't see on a regular basis. Your job is to listen and ask intelligent questions – let the other person set the agenda. You may have to get creative to make these meetings happen, such as orchestrating “accidental” hallway meetings with a busy manager.

Really Listen

Observe and listen carefully. Too often, we yield quickly to the temptation to talk. We suggest solutions after only cursory listening. Instead, listen actively and ask probing questions in a friendly way. If you are consistent, you will build a reputation for an open door and an open mind. People will seek you out early when there is trouble brewing under the surface because they know you will help.

Wander Around

Hewlett-Packard first popularized MBWA (Management by Wandering Around). MBWA may conjure up images of time-wasting, unfocused wandering, but there is a disciplined technique to it. Look at the diagram below. How can you use MBWA to get better information on the progress of your projects?



Glance management may seem soft and squishy. After all, you've got work to do and metrics to measure. Isn't it a waste of time? On the contrary - it is an effective way to use your limited project management time. You can gather information, build morale, improve “hidden” problems, and communicate your leadership vision. You will get key information about project issues far sooner and in clearer detail than by relying solely on formal status reports and indicators. The nasty surprises you avoid will make your projects more successful.

About the Author

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