

Ready, Set, Go! Generating Momentum on a New Project

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Sometimes in our eagerness to get started on a new project, we fail to realize our team members don't share our enthusiasm. Team member attention is critical to the success of any project, so we need to capture their interest early on. Here are some tips for generating momentum on a fledging project.

Consider the Politics and Culture of the Organization

Building momentum requires an understanding of the political landscape and culture of the organization you are working in. Exert too much enthusiasm in an understated organization and you'll overwhelm your team and come across as an ingénue. Demonstrate too little enthusiasm and you will portray a disinterest that is contagious to your team. It helps to follow the queues of other successful project managers. Do they rely solely on the kick-off meeting to generate momentum, or do they do activities behind the scenes to really enlist support and build excitement?

Ensure Tasks and Task Ownership are Clear

Projects succeed when the people working on them understand what needs to be done and who needs to do it. Clarity of tasks and task ownership are critical components in the art of generating momentum. When people understand what they personally need to do, they feel more confident about doing the work.

Draw a Complete Roadmap

Even if you are not completely clear on all the steps your team must take to accomplish the project goals, you must give your team an initial start-to-finish roadmap of the path they will be taking.

Think of it like the road trip you took with your family last summer. When you left your house, you may not have known about the construction at mile 250, the bathroom break at mile 325, and the detour at mile 500, but you did know your start and end points and the general path you would take to get there. You probably have a similar sense for that path on your project, even if you can only state the path according to a sequence of phases (for example, scoping, requirements, design, build, test, deploy.). Spell the path out as best you can. Provide a timeline and milestones if possible. If you can provide a full-fledged WBS and project schedule, even better.

Roadmaps give your team members context for their current work and confidence that you will help them tie their work together into a cohesive outcome. This context and confidence inspires work that generates momentum.

Use Accomplishments to Perpetuate Progress

Momentum is built one small step at a time. Give your team members some small steps to achieve at the start of the project. Tasks achieved within one to two weeks of the beginning of a six-month project will help the team and the sponsors feel a sense of accomplishment. Early accomplishments cast a positive light which makes people

gravitate to the project. Some organizations call this concept “low hanging fruit”. Once you have defined your roadmap, pick a point that is no more than 10-20% of the way into the trip and define a milestone associated with that point.

This milestone must be achievable. Set your team up for success by making this milestone well-defined, sabotage-proof, and predominantly within your control to complete.

This milestone must also be important, which means it must produce an output that is meaningful towards the overall goal for the project.

Although you will accomplish many tasks during this 2-4 week period, pick the one that is the most achievable and meaningful as your milestone. The purpose of this milestone is to build credibility and create positive mojo for your team. Make sure you and your team feel confident about your ability to deliver on it. You know the old adage: “under promise and over deliver”.



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Plan for Progress Instead of Perfection

People need to know it's OK if they mess up. Your team and your sponsors need to feel confident that you can help them and the project recover from mistakes. One of the main reasons people procrastinate is fear of failure. Procrastination can cause a slow death of momentum, even on midstream projects where momentum is well-established.

Alleviate the fear of failure by establishing a proactive, progress-oriented project culture from the onset. When mistakes occur (and they will), prove your flexibility and ingenuity as a project manager by helping your team to recover. When you help your team members fix mistakes, you earn your team members' trust and your sponsors' confidence. You'll be able to approach mistakes with a more level head if you plan for progress and permit imperfection.

Aim for Self-Perpetuating Momentum

It takes energy to generate momentum...energy that you as the project manager could be spending on other important tasks. You don't want to find yourself in a permanent state of trying to generate momentum. And you don't want your team to become too dependent upon your energy to keep them going. You can get them started, but eventually team members need to perpetuate their own momentum. Keep an eye out

for these signs. When you see them, pull back and assess whether your team has reached the point of self-perpetuating momentum.

- Team members are able to answer their own questions about the project's operating procedures and processes.
- Team members are reliably completing procedural tasks (like status reports, budget updates, and issue logs) without your prompting.
- Your team has stopped 'storming' and is now 'norming'.
- Your sponsors seem a little more relaxed and confident that you have things under control.
- Your best PM instincts tell you that your team members understand their responsibilities and are making genuine progress.

When you have achieved momentum, make sure you highlight the accomplishment. Once your team feels that forward motion, they will be exhilarated and want more of it.