"Our plans miscarry because they have not aim. When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind."

-Seneca

SO, WHAT'S YOUR CHARTER?

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Projects are risky business. They last a significant period of time, cost a great deal of money, involve numerous participants from all over the organization, are susceptible to unexpected change and must satisfy a diverse set of customers. The products of these projects are usually unlike anything you've ever produced, so you don't really know when the project is really done until it is REALLY done.

Many factors go into making a project work. Let one or two of them slip out of control and the project is history. Does all this make you want to reconsider your career choice?

I'll resist the temptation to create another list of the problems that can shipwreck a project. Instead, let me propose a formal process that can get your project off to a great start, so you can keep it under control.

Your manager enters your office. "I have the greatest news. We finally got the customer to agree to the Armageddon Project." "Wonderful," you reply as you try to close the window on your Solitaire hand. "Yes," your manager continues, "We've been trying to get this turkey off the ground for over a year. But you know how politics can be."

"What's the big deal about this project," you ask? "I'm not sure," your manager answers. "All we have on it is a one line description . . . and a due date." "So, who's the poor fool you're going to ask to manage this thing," you say? Do I need to go any further? You know how this story ends. Here are your choices...

    A. You can tender your resignation on the spot; or
    B. You can act like you've never heard of the project and pass it on to someone who works for you; or
    C. You can race to the customer with a "quick and dirty" (emphasis on dirty) answer and see if they like it; or
    D. You can create a Project Charter

If you answered A, B, or C, you should drop this document into the nearest trash can and forever swear off project management. "But, what IS a Project Charter," you wonder.

Webster describes a charter as "a declaration or document setting forth the aims and principles of a group united in an undertaking." I define a Project Charter as ...

> *…a formal agreement between the creators and consumers of project deliverables that establishes the purpose, boundaries, directions, limitations and participants of a project.*

The goal of a Project Charter is to achieve consensus between all the key players … at the start of the project when there is the greatest opportunity for agreement. Projects offer real benefit to an organization. Most

are quite feasible and the affected organizations want the project. They approved the funding for it! Creating a well-defined Project Charter is simply good business. It is a highly professional act that pays dividends throughout the life of the effort.

If you can't get your customers, owners and team members aligned on the project at the very beginning, what are the chances of it happening later? Simply stated, no charter, no project! "We can't get people to agree on anything around here," one airline manager told me. "People won't even come to meetings to discuss the project." And they wonder why their projects fail.

If, during the first days of a project, you cannot reach agreement with other project stakeholders on the fundamental intent, goals and directions for a project, now is the time to stop the effort. Don't wait until the project has consumed huge amounts of hours and finances before you recognize that this one was doomed from the start.

If you've been saddled with a very contentions effort, use the Project Charter to identify the specific areas of conflict. You will not find a better time or vehicle to raise these issues.

Charter Components

While there are many variations on what should be in a Project Charter, I propose nine base components. They are the...

- **Project Description** - An executive summary of the entire document that provides a brief history of the events that led to the project, an explanation of why the project was initiated, a description of project intent and the identity of the initial Project Owner.
- **Project Goals** - The most significant business reasons for doing this project. This may include a vision for future

project deliverables, a list of anticipated features, a list of expected advantages and the identification of the intended customers for project deliverables.

- **Impact Statement** - The influence this project may have on the business, operations, schedule, other projects, current technology and other application systems.
- **Constraints and Assumptions** - Any deliberate or implied limitations or restrictions placed on the project along with any current or future environment the project must accommodate. The potential influence of each of these factors should be identified here.
- **Project Scope** - A precise definition of project boundaries. Specific scope components may include the business areas or functions to be examined by the project (Domain of Study), the work that will be performed (Domain of Work) and the actual results that will be produced (Deliverables). Project Scope should identify both what IS in scope and what IS NOT scope.
- **Project Objectives** - A list of *measurable* criteria that can help certify project success.
- **Financial Summary** - A recap of known costs and benefits from performing the project. These financials must be reforecast during the life of the project and should be compared to actuals at the conclusion of the project.
- **Project Approach** - The general strategy for how the project will be done along with non-technical descriptions of any methods, processes or tools that will be used during the project.
- **Project Organization -** Identification of the roles and responsibilities needed to create a meaningful and responsive structure that will make the project more successful. The Project Organi-

zation should identify the people who will play assigned roles.

The Project Charter is NOT…

When using a new tool or process, there is the tendency to apply it to anything and everything that moves in an organization. Project Charters are one of the top "take home" items presented in our Project Management seminars. They are easily implemented and immediately valued by the total business organization. And, sometimes, they get abused.

No matter how good your Project Charter is, it is not everything you need to manage your project. It does not replace project plans (work decompositions, estimates, deployment and schedules), change requests, issues, staff profiles, status reports or any of the other basic components of a project notebook.

Project Charters are NOT necessarily useful on ALL types of projects. If you are managing a well-defined, predictable, *continuous* effort, you may wish to create a document that covers a wide range of operational guidelines such as a Service Level Agreement.

Project Charters are more effective for *single-time efforts* that are fast moving and highly dynamic. With a single-time effort, you do not have the luxury of multiple passes through a stable process to get the deliverables right. Instead, you will have a limited opportunity to produce meaningful deliverables. You will be following a progressive plan (where yesterday's work is old news) instead of a repetitive plan. In this situation, it is critical that you have a clear understanding of where you are going … at least for now, and gain consensus approval of that direction.

When used properly, the Project Charter becomes a natural, visible and very popular way of starting a project. A good Project Charter will be *written, unbiased, living, available* and *consistent*.

Written

I'm not much of believer in "oral" history on projects. I find that key people develop intermittent and very selective cases of amnesia. Beyond that, someone claims that they never heard about a certain issue, and its usually too late to do anything about it.

Some people believe these topics are common knowledge. I generally find a serious failure to capture knowledge about any of these subjects, and the knowledge is rarely common.

Even if you already have an "informal" agreement about your project, you will find that the very act of writing will help you clarify your thoughts and certify the actual agreement. The Project Charter must be a formal, written document.

Unbiased

A Project Charter should serve the interest of all the related parties. The Charter doesn't protect one group of people from another, it serves all equally. Think of it as an "agreement in principle." My attorney insists that there is no such thing. This, I believe, is an unfortunate reflection on society and our legal process.

The Project Charter is not a legal contract, complete with small print, mystifying words and more escape routes than a Saturday morning cartoon. It is an agreement between one set of people who need something and another group who agrees to fulfill that need. It is a mutually beneficial document that describes a mutually beneficial process. It provides common ground for all project

discussions and it establishes the basis for most decisions.

I am not proposing that we do away with legal documents. You may need them to enforce specific relationships and deliverables. But that is NOT the job of the Project Charter. The Project Charter should provide a statement of what everyone understands about the project. Think of it as a written, hand-shake agreement.

Living

When you create a Project Charter, it describes your project at a specific point in time, usually the beginning. You review it with other project participants to obtain their perspectives. You add their observations and what do you have? A living document! Every component of the Project Charter describes characteristics that may, and probably will, change during the life of the project. As the environment changes, change the Project Charter.

Beyond reaching project consensus, the Project Charter establishes a baseline for managing this natural change. Without a Project Charter, altering a project's direction, along with the associated costs and schedule impacts, can become a nasty and contentious political battle. One group claims they always expected a specific feature while another group denies ever hearing about it.

A living Project Charter establishes the needs and expectations the total organization has for an effort. Tactical plans are created directly from this document. When change comes, you can easily display the influence on the components of the Project Charter and then to the schedule.

Available

Secret documents breed distrust between project participants. On the first day of the

biggest project in my career, I invited two key customers to my office. Pointing to a bookcase in the corner, I explained that it would hold every technical document, memo, status report or scrap of paper that pertained to their project. Further, I invited them to take any of those materials whenever they wished. I wanted to establish an open setting for the project. No private deals, no secret meetings.

The Project Charter can help you create such an environment. Make sure that everyone sees the document. The immediate audience includes the Project Owner and all members of the Project Team. It may also be distributed to other managers and individuals who play minor roles to the project.

Several organizations post their Project Charters to an electronic library just so everyone knows what is going on across their organization. We have helped several organizations design and build intranet products to store, manage and distribute project information. This is great stuff, don't hide it.

Consistent

When creating Project Charters, consistency is a virtue. Establish a pattern for content and organization then stick with it. This allows you to borrow ideas from previous projects and share your results with other project managers.

Consistency also lets your customer know what to expect at the beginning of each new project. This provides a common guideline for others to follow.

Don't take this to an extreme. Project Charters are not holy writing. If you find that you need to address a specific subject and it is not covered by the basic components, add a new category. But you don't want each

project manager inventing a private definition for Project Charter content and format.

For Project Management to become a repeatable process, we must establish a few standards to measure against. Consistent Project Charters get you off to a great start. (If you want a good template to get you started, you'll find one on our website at www.TryonAssoc.com in the "News and Information - Templates" area.)

Conclusion

The Project Charter should be some of the first information you record about a project. Think of it as a baby book. Each new version describes a specific point in the project's life. This is your best chance to gain agreement about what you are expected to do. Don't wait until there are problems to resolve these issues. Get your arms around your project early, and then keep it under control.

The Tryon and Associates Approach

Tryon and Associates has offered Project Management training and consulting since 1985 to some of the largest (and some of the smallest) organizations in the United States, Canada and Europe. Our courses originally targeted the Information Technology industry, where single-time efforts are the norm. Since 1990, however, our seminars have been used by organizations who specialize in research and development, product development, marketing, general business and plant operations. While many of these companies continue to perform continuous efforts, they are shifting their focus to single-time efforts.

The Tryon and Associates curriculum has been crafted just for this expanded audience with concise, focused material that provides the type and level of knowledge needed to perform these modern projects. **Managing Single-Time Efforts** *proves valuable for every segment of an organization that is part of the project effort. Designated Project Managers, Team Members and interested management continue on to the planning, control and assessment tools of* **Project Management Fundamentals***.*

The right amount of education in a compressed period of time for the complete project audience . . . and at an affordable cost.