

# Using Project Vital Signs to Prioritize Expectations

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## Executive Summary

Less effective Project Managers manage the factors that are easy to measure, rather than those that are most important to project stakeholders. Then they wonder why they get suboptimal results. Start the project with agreement about the results by using this exercise. Then goal-seek to optimize your performance in the top-priority items, and use your flexibility in the lower-priority items to meet stakeholder expectations.

Ten factors make up the PMBOK® Guide's knowledge areas (now eleven, with Stakeholder Management). Rather than using some of these as constraints, as many have done, we have used a subset of those areas for over 30 years as the **vital signs of project success**. They are represented in the diagram below, and briefly explain them (note: in the PMBOK Guide, the areas are described as Project Scope Management, etc. and the latest PMBOK Guide knowledge area, Stakeholder Management, is not on this chart or the article).

- Scope, which is **what you'll produce** (don't try to solve world hunger).
- Quality, how well you produce it. This should be constant, but is sub-optimized when we focus too much on easier to measure vital signs.
- Time, and Cost, which when properly used do not constrain scope, but reflect your efficiency in delivering it.
- Risk, which identifies situations that can imperil the project, offset by responses you identify to prevent, intervene or recover, to avoid harming the other vital signs (time, cost, quality, and so on).
- Procurement provides the contract labor, tools, components, supplies and capital outlay to help with the work.
- Human Resources, which we prefer to call Talent, provides the right people with the right skills and experience to perform the work as efficiently and effectively as possible.
- Integration coordinates the development, execution and changes to the project plan. Note that executing the plan means to carry it out (not kill it).
- Communication, or as Joan Rivers, the comedian, says "Can we talk?" Of course, for projects, you'll use many communication venues; the project plan or status report are just two examples of these venues.



## Three Challenges

1. Differing priorities among stakeholders can result in poor project performance.
2. Inability to get clear priorities can cause teams to fail to use flexibility they should use.
3. Post-Project reviews sometimes use different priorities than those stressed during the project.

For any project to be successful, you must manage all nine areas. This can be challenging when you try to respond to differing priorities of different stakeholders. Given agreement about the absolute priorities, project teams can use their flexibility, in some cases engaging stakeholders in their efforts. For example, If Time, Cost and Quality are the top three rank-ordered vital signs, the team should goal-seek to success in those areas by establishing flexibility in Scope, Human Resources, Procurement and Risk. Well, maybe not risk, if your enterprise is Risk-averse.

In this article, we illuminate that point with an exercise we use in Rapid Initial Planning, our project start-up consulting service. We describe the exercise below.

## An Exercise

**OBJECTIVE:** To get agreement about the relative priority of your project's vital signs, or knowledge areas.

**PROCESS:** You perform this exercise first individually, and then compare results with other stakeholders and your team. Even when you cannot get your stakeholders to do this exercise at project start-up you can still get a useful perspective by doing it individually.

*Tip:* to reduce prioritizing complexity to those factors that are measurable outcomes, rather than key and essential parts of your management process, consider dropping Procurement, Integration and Communication from the Vital Signs prioritization; these are beneficial musts, and should always be top priorities.

1. First, working individually, list the six measurable Vital Signs on a sheet of paper.

2. Rank order the three most important of those Vital Signs from each of these perspectives:

- Project Team
- Sponsors and Resource Managers
- End Users

3. Organize your stakeholders into three groups: Project Team, Sponsors & Resource Managers, and End Users. Each group should get consensus about the rank order of the top three Vital Signs for their respective role. If time permits, each group should also agree on the rank order as perceived by the other groups. (Note: Resource Managers are those managers one and two levels up from the project team who set priorities and allocate skilled resources appropriately.)

4. Share your results from Step 3. Answer these questions:

Q: What, if any, common threads or startlingly different perspectives do you see?

Q: How might these priorities change after the project is complete? Why?

Q: How should you reconcile any differences in stakeholder priorities during the project?

Q: How would you reconcile the changes in priorities after the project is complete?

5. Work with your stakeholders to get consensus about the top 3 Vital Signs. Record the results on a flipchart. Record 2-3 reasons why your group established this priority sequence. Later in the project, refer to this list of reasons for ideas whenever you need to do a better job of reconciling differences in priorities.

6. Three or four months into the project (and at regular intervals thereafter) pull out the original flipchart pages and verify that you are still targeting the same Vital Signs. Often we fall back to those factors that are easier to manage, but are not our preferred results. Redirect the project as needed, or change the priorities if the project's business case warrants it.

7. At the end of the project, include the priorities and your performance against them in your project evaluation and Lessons Learned process. For extra credit, consider re-evaluating the priorities a year after the project is completed; you may be surprised to find that your stakeholders now have different priorities. Does this suggest anything in measuring project success?

## About the Author



**STACY A. GOFF**, *the PM Performance Coach*<sup>™</sup>, has coached and inspired tens of thousands of project and program managers, and hundreds of organizations, on five continents, for over forty years. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he has also been a strong contributor to professional organizations such as IPMA® and PMI® since 1983.

He is a co-founder and past-president of IPMA-USA, and 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. In September, 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow.

Goff's interest in project competence and performance began with establishing a PM Competency Center for a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s.

It continued with international engagements during the 1980s and 90s as he helped organizations assess and improve their project and program performance. Today, he coaches, speaks and performs keynote speeches

at major project-related events. And, he continues to pursue his interest in individual, project team, organization, and national and international PM performance.

Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Project Management coaching, consulting, and training. His insight for the needed PM Competences, and his delivery of effective training translate to improved project performance. In his working life, he combines his Project experience with sensitivity for the interpersonal skills areas—the human aspects of projects.

In his papers, presentations, workshops or in consulting, he combines his project experience with strategic linkage for all projects and programs. His insights and experience have provided competitive advantage for his clients for over 40 years. His business result: measurably increased **PM Performance**.

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