Journal of the National Institute of Plantation Management, (2013),27(01)

PROJECT ISSUE MANAGEMENT - IDENTIFYING AND RESOLVING ISSUES

N Yogaratnam[1]

In the life cycle of any project, there will almost always be unexpected problems and questions that crop up. When these issues arise, you have to be ready to deal with them – or they can potentially affect the project's outcome.

Since most issues are, by their nature, unexpected, how do you make sure you'll be able to deal with them quickly and effectively? Ideally, you need an issue resolution process in place before you start your project – to make sure that you stay on schedule, and meet your objectives.

Issue management is the process of identifying and resolving issues. Problems with staff or suppliers, technical failures, material shortages – these might all have a negative impact on your project. If the issue goes unresolved, you risk creating unnecessary conflicts, delays, or even failure to produce your deliverable.

Issues versus Risks

Issues and risks are not quite the same thing. However, the exact nature of both is largely unknown before you begin. With risks, you usually have a general idea in advance that there's a cause for concern. An issue tends to be less predictable; it can arise with no warning. For example, being unable to find qualified staff is an identifiable risk. However, when one of your staff is in a car accident, and hospitalized for three weeks, that becomes an issue!

It's important to identify risks before the project begins.

A Risk/Impact Probability Chart provides a useful framework to help you prioritize your risks. You can then develop a plan to manage those risks proactively with solutions that you've already thought through and prearranged. However, when it comes to issues, you have to deal with them as they happen. Issue management, therefore, is a planned process for dealing with an unexpected issue – whatever that issue may be – if and when one arises.

Tip:

When you don't identify and reduce risks at the beginning of a project, they can often become issues later on. Make sure you understand your risks early. Learn from previous projects, and benefit from the team's past experiences. This way, you'll have fewer issues to manage as you move forward.

[1] Consultant / NIPM

Issues Log

Issues – otherwise known as problems, gaps, inconsistencies, or conflicts – need to be recorded when they happen. When you create an issues log, you provide a tool for reporting and communicating what's happening with the project. This makes sure that issues are indeed raised, and then investigated and resolved quickly and effectively. Without a defined process, you risk ignoring issues, or not taking them seriously enough – until it's too late to deal with them successfully.

An issues log allows you to do the following:

- Have a safe and reliable method for the team to raise issues.
- Track and assign responsibility to specific people for each issue.
- Analyze and prioritize issues more easily.
- Record issue resolution for future reference and project learning.
- Monitor overall project health and status.

You can create an issues log by hand, build your own spreadsheet or database, or buy issue management software from a wide variety of vendors. Alternatively, you can use our free **Issue Management Log**.

However, do bear in mind that the success of your issue management process doesn't necessarily depend on which tracking mechanism you use, but rather on the type of information you track.

You can include following information in an issues log:

- **Issue type** – Define the categories of issues that you're likely to encounter. This helps you track issues and assign the right people to resolve them. You could have broad descriptions like these:
  - Technical – Relating to a technological problem in the project.
  - Business process – Relating to the project's design.
  - Change management – Relating to business, customer, or environmental changes.
  - Resource – Relating to equipment, material, or people problems.
  - Third party – Relating to issues with vendors, suppliers, or another outside party.
- **Identifier** - Record who discovered the issue.
- **Timing** – Indicate when the issue was identified.
- **Description** – Provide details about what happened, and the potential impact. If the issue remains unresolved, identify which parts of the project will be affected.
- **Priority** – Assign a priority rating to the issue. Here's an example:
  - High priority – A critical issue that will have a high impact on project success, and has the potential to stop the project completely.

- Medium priority – An issue that will have a noticeable impact, but won't stop the project from proceeding.
- Low priority – An issue that doesn't affect activities on the critical path, and probably won't have much impact if it's resolved at some point.

- **Assignment/owner** – Determine who is responsible for resolving the issue. This person may or may not actually implement a solution. However, he or she is responsible for tracking it, and ensuring that it's dealt with according to its priority.
- **Target resolution date** – Determine the deadline for resolving the issue.

Tip:
If a date for resolution changes, keep both the old date and the new date visible. This helps you spot issues that have been on the log for a long time. Then you can either give them extra attention, or take them off the list if they're no longer important.

- **Status** – Track the progress of the resolution with a clear label identifying the issue's overall status. Here's an example:
  - Open – The issue has been identified, but no action has yet been taken.
  - Investigating – The issue, and possible solutions, are being investigated.
  - Implementing – The issue resolution is in process.
  - Escalated – The issue has been raised to management or the project sponsor/steering committee, and directions or approval of a solution is pending.
  - Resolved – The resolution has been implemented, and the issue is closed.

Tip:
Use 'traffic lights' when reporting issues. This provides an easy-to-see indication of whether issues are under control. Traffic lights could be used as follows:

- Red - Cannot proceed before issue is resolved.
- Yellow - Resolution in process, and you'll be able to proceed soon.
- Green - Resolution implemented, and issue no longer exists.

- **Action/resolution description** – Describe the status of the issue, and what has been done to find and implement a resolution. Include the dates of each action. Here's an example:
  - January 5 –Assigned issue to Samantha.
  - January 7 – Testing started to identify origin of problem.
  - January 8 – Solution suggested, and sent to steering committee for approval.
  - January 10 – Approval received. Assigned implementation to Gregory.
  - January 14 – Solution successful. Issue resolved.
- **Final resolution** – Include a brief description of what was done to address the issue.

Issues Management Framework

Supplement your issues log with a framework, or process, for dealing with those issues. This framework helps the project team understand what to do with issues once they've been identified and logged. Developing the framework answers questions like these:

- How will you assign responsibility for resolving the issue? For example, is there one person who handles all technical issues? Who would handle a vendor issue?
- How will you know when to escalate an issue to management or the steering committee? You may want to create a matrix of potential business impact versus issue complexity to help you decide which issues should be taken to higher levels of management.
- Which criteria will determine an issue's priority status?
- Who will set the target resolution date?
- How will issues be communicated within the team? Will you use regular meetings, log checks, status update emails, and so on?
- How will you identify different issues if several occur during one project? It is helpful to number them so that you can identify issues easily when discussing them in progress meetings.
- If change orders are needed, how will those be handled?
- When the resolution affects the budget or schedule, what will the update process be, and who will be responsible?

One of the key challenges of issues management is to resolve the problem quickly and then move on, with as little impact to the project as possible. The framework provides a structure for making decisions when issues arise. Remember to consider your team's needs as you develop the framework.

It's also important to make sure you cover all issues in your **Post-Implementation Review**. This is where you capture lessons learned for future projects. The more you learn about your issues, the better prepared you'll be for the next project. Some issues might occur again, so by recording what you've learned from previous projects, it will be easier for subsequent project teams to identify the issues, and resolve them successfully. Other issues might be part of a risk pattern that you can proactively identify and manage with early risk assessment.

Key Points

An issues management process gives you a robust way of identifying and documenting issues and problems that occur during a project. The process also makes it easier to evaluate these issues, assess their impact, and decide on a plan for resolution. An issues log helps you capture the details of each issue, so that the project team can quickly see the status, and who is responsible for resolving it. When you add an issues management framework, you have a comprehensive plan to deal with issues quickly and effectively. This organized approach to managing issues provides many valuable insights that can be used to refine and improve future project results.