BRILLIANT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

STEPHEN BARKER & ROB COLE 3rd Edition

project management

illustrating this slant on quality! Say we have the job of supplying taps to one of the finest hotels in the world, which is seeking to attract customers who are used to the finest things in life. The specification for the taps would include practical things such as the ability to turn on and off, and long-term reliability. But, being a very upmarket hotel, gold plating or some other sign of opulence would also be essential. Now imagine that we're supplying taps to a budget chain of hotels. The ability to turn on and off and reliability would still be relevant requirements – but any additional luxurious embellishment would be an expensive frivolity.

So, in our world, quality hinges on what extent something is *fit for the purpose for which it is intended* – not whether it has any special worth or extra degree of refinement. In fact, by our definition, both over-engineered and under-engineered solutions are poor quality. Ultimately, this requires a good understanding of what the customer *needs*, not just what the customer *wants*.

Barker & Cole's world of simple definitions

Quality is all about delivering something that's fit for the purpose for which it's intended.

Agreeing what's fit-for-purpose

The biggest problem with the pursuit of quality is in making it a tangible, measurable concept. After all, how can you be expected to deliver quality if it's specified in vague terms? Delivering something that's of *good quality* or *appropriate quality* is as difficult as clapping with one hand.

We know from experience that it can be difficult to reach agreement as to what fit-for-purpose really means. This is because a project manager may well disagree with the customer's view

of what's essential. This isn't to say you shouldn't be prepared to debate the necessity of their requirements, but you must remember that ultimately it's the customer's final decision as to how fitness for purpose is specified.

Getting a clear and reliable definition of what constitutes fit-for-purpose on your project is crucial for its success. We therefore want to take a closer look at exactly what we mean by *fit-for-purpose* in the project context. Much hinges on reaching a reasonable agreement with your customer about the essence of what is needed.

Poor quality leaves behind a bitter taste that lingers longer than the warm glow generated by achieving a tight deadline or a cheap price.

Fit-for-purpose baseline

Put simply, your objective is to deliver your project with your *customers* accepting that what you've supplied is fit for its intended purpose. To achieve this you'll need to agree a specific set of deliverables before you start work. This needs to be more than just a simple list and should be a rich description of all of the important features.

It's usually difficult to establish the fine detail of what's required for a project – especially in the early stages. Your first attempts to nail down what the customer wants are likely to be sprinkled with extra features that can't be accurately claimed as essential. Your role is to help your customers sort out the genuinely mandatory (the must-haves) from the really important and nice-to-haves.

A useful technique for steering your customers through this discussion is to introduce some kind of prioritisation. You can then

let your customers list everything, even the bells and whistles, as long as they attach their rating of how essential each item is. The next step is to work with them to agree which are *absolutely essential* for the project to meet its objectives.

Reaching a perfect agreement isn't a reasonable expectation: it's not necessary either. As long as the specification isn't inundated with superfluous extras, there's no problem with accepting a few extra treats. It's far better to let a couple of extra features creep in – even if you're convinced they're not entirely necessary – as long as the bulk of the requirements are pitched correctly. After all, in the end it's your customers' call as to what's deemed essential and what's not.

The resulting mandatory requirements equip you with a *minimum fit-for-purpose baseline*. As a brilliant project manager, you'll want to deliver considerably more than this.

Fit-for-purpose baseline top tips

- *Ensure the people who agree the quality baseline are also involved in the project sign-off*. This will achieve a consistent view on what's fit-for-purpose.
- *The definition of a mandatory requirement is that if it's not met, the whole delivery has to be rejected*. Use this acid test to encourage your customers to be reasonable about what's listed as essential.
- *Agree the relative priority of optional add-ons*. Treats aren't of equal importance, and you may have to sacrifice some in favour of others.
- *Help your customers to understand the cost of items that are of marginal benefit*. Encourage them to consider dropping anything that's poor value.
- *Anything included in the fit-for-purpose baseline is non-negotiable*. If time or cost pressures become acute, some treats will have to be dropped.

Negotiating around quality

One of the biggest problems you'll face is an inflated set of mandatory requirements – in fact this happens on nearly every project. It's not unknown for everything to become essential. This distorts the definition of what fit-for-purpose means, and increases costs and timescales. It also removes scope for manoeuvre if times get tough, because too many treats are seen as non-discretionary.

Sometimes this happens innocently, when customers confuse what they'd *like* with what they really *need*. Other times, the reasons are more calculated. Keep an eye out for typical problems in this area:

- *Lack of experience in stating what's needed.* There's a good chance that the people responsible for providing requirements will be doing this without much experience. So they'll need some guidance on how they should go about describing what they need. They'll also need to understand the implications of loading on requirements that aren't strictly necessary.
- *Different perspectives from the top and bottom*. Most projects have to serve a variety of masters, striking a balance between achieving high-level goals and delivering something useful for people working at the coal face. People at an operational level tend to overstate what they can't live without and more senior personnel tend to see too many things as just nice-to-have.
- *Taking a negotiating position.* Given that most projects are known to falter in one way or another, many customers anticipate their project will fall short of whatever's agreed up-front. Therefore they (craftily) overstate their requirements, so they can be negotiated back to where they wanted to be in the first place.

Whatever the reason, it's important to coax customers back into

realistic definitions of what they really need and what they'd like. Facilitate a meaningful discussion on this and try to tease out the facts. However, remember that it's the customer, not you, who makes the final call on what fit-for-purpose means for a project. Accept that the interpretation of quality inevitably involves some degree of subjectivity. After all, you won't be able to persuade the owners of Dubai's seven-star Burj Al Arab Hotel – reputedly the most luxurious in the world – that lavish bathroom fittings are a nice-to-have optional extra!

It shouldn't happen to a project manager (but it did) …

The explanation of the importance of prioritising requirements went down extremely well with one receptive customer: 'This is a much better way of doing things.' The project manager approached the rating of the requirements list with confidence. She started at the top and worked her way down. The first requirement was rated as a 'mandatory'. This was quickly followed by 'mandatory' for the second. And the third, and so on, until all the requirements were universally rated as essential and non-negotiable. The customer was delighted with the requirements prioritisation exercise.

Like giving up a bad habit, it's easier to gain agreement to the theory than to put it into practice.

Measuring quality

There's an old saying that 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it'. On a project, if you have some clear and well-thought-out measures for assessing what's fit-for-purpose, it's going to be easier to spot things going wrong and to act accordingly. So how do you go about doing this?

Our starting point is that a project's success will largely be assessed by the things it *delivers*, rather than the activities it *does*

to deliver. So, quality measures must focus on project outputs; these include both the final deliverables and any intermediate ones that are required along the way.

The most basic question is whether all of the planned deliverables have been produced. The next level of assessment is to take a close look at what's been produced to see whether they conform to specification. A great way to do this is to use *quality criteria*. These are tests that should be applied to a deliverable to see whether it's fit-for-purpose.

We recommend you phrase your quality criteria as succinct and specific questions. These will encourage an objective and focused assessment of what's been produced. For example: 'Have the foundations been dug to sufficient depth to support the planned two-storey building?'.

Quality criteria should be defined up-front as part of specifying a project deliverable. That way, the people who are working on your project will know how their efforts will be assessed. This in turn increases the probability that what they turn out will be fit-for-purpose.

Barker & Cole's top tips

When you're defining your quality criteria, don't just think short term. It's easy to overlook some of the things that might matter once the project has been wrapped up. For example, you might want quality criteria to check the ease of maintenance once the project team has been disbanded.

Quality reviews

A key principle of project quality control is that measures are taken at frequent intervals – *especially* early on. It's essential to reduce the cost of any rework by intercepting problems when