

A Great Project Manager is a Great Leader

Find out the essential questions you need to ask about project management, what to look for if you are considering hiring a consulting firm, and one thing you might think you need but may not

It sounds simple enough. Your business has a project and you need someone to run it.

And yet ...

Perhaps you don't have a designated project manager in-house. You *could* delegate the job, but if the person doesn't have experience, the project may fail. And then there's the fact that a lot of your full time employees should be focused on their core job duties and not acting as project managers.

On the other hand, maybe your company *does* have a project management organization. Trouble is, it may not have the bandwidth, or it may not be agile enough for the work you need done.

You need a PM with enough experience to know what NOT to include.

A blend of art and science

Project management -- the application of process, knowledge, and experience to getting something done -- is a blend of art and science.

Organizations that have grown organically flail sometimes because they haven't taken the time to create a formal project management process. At the same time, too much process can be overkill.

Sometimes you just need to take a step back and figure out the right questions to ask. Sometimes you need to bring in someone from the outside to help.

Key questions to ask

If you are running a project, here are the questions you need to answer:

1. Do you have a project management process?
2. Has your organization done a similar project before? If so, can you borrow the same approach?
3. Have you identified the project's key stakeholders?
4. Do the stakeholders agree on the project and its goals?
5. What's the scope and complexity of the project? If the project is high-risk or requires a lot of executive communications, you may need someone senior running it. Otherwise, a coordinator may be able to run the project effectively.
6. What's your budget?
7. When's your deadline?
8. Does the project align with the goals and mission of your organization?
9. Is the right team on the bus? Be sure that, collectively, they have the expertise to get the job done.
10. Do you have an ROI?

If these are questions you or your team CAN answer and you are comfortable with the answer, you may be well-positioned to handle the work in-house.

However, if your team doesn't have the background or bandwidth, or if you just need a fresh perspective, you may be best served bringing in outside help. You'd be surprised at the insight you can get about your project when a professional with fresh eyes takes a look at them.

Guidelines for hiring a consulting firm

If you are at the point where you're ready to consider support from a management consultancy, here are some key things to keep in mind.

Background and experience: The consulting firm should have comfort and experience with project management in multiple industries and areas of operations. This helps bring a broad range of solutions to bear. Make sure their certifications, experience, and areas of expertise align with the work you need done.

Tactical skills: Find out if the consulting firm has done similar projects and ask for examples. You want to know about the scope, budget, and schedule -- and about the challenges that came up and how they addressed them.

Methodology. Consider PMBOK as a starting point -- the Project Management Body of Knowledge is the most widely recognized project management methodology. Waterfall and agile are also common approaches.

Approach and Adaptability. Project management methodologies can get really heavy. Look for someone who has the knowledge and experience to know what they DON'T have to do. For example, the ability to apply a hybrid approach (like "agile-fall") or to adapt to your in-house methodology.

Leadership. Project managers need to be able to create collaborative project teams where every member is heard.

Soft skills. Since they act as leaders without authority, your consultants MUST connect with you and your team. It takes charisma and likeability to succeed -- just as much as having the chops.

Curiosity. Consultants should ask the "tough" questions and seek answers tenaciously.

Cost. Be sure to do the math around hiring a full-time employee vs. bringing in a consulting firm. It is usually a long-term commitment to hire an employee to manage your projects. If you expect to have a long series of projects this may make complete sense. However, it may make sense to hire a consultant if your project management needs are limited in duration.

Strategy session. Since you want a company you can build a relationship with, the consulting firm should be willing to do an initial strategy session. From this initial engagement you will be able to assess their strengths and overall fit with your team.

An understanding that one size DOESN'T fit all. Look for a consulting firm who will LISTEN first, to find out what your problems are, before they begin suggesting solutions.

Big-picture outlook. The consulting firm should be able to tie the proposed work back to improved value or return on investment, such as a better experience for employees, a better client experience, fewer process steps, etc.

What's the surprising thing about project management?

A great project manager is a great leader. They need to know not just how to herd cats, but also when to push, and how to deliver feedback in tense environments.

A great project manager is also flexible. So, look for a project manager who knows the process, but isn't overburdened by it. Look for a project manager that understands your business, the concepts behind other disciplines such as business analysis, change management and process improvement. Look for someone who can work lean, but not so lean they lose effectiveness. Look for someone who will fit your culture.

THAT'S what will make your project succeed.

Want to see how Loft9 can help you with YOUR project?

Contact us to schedule your strategy consultation. In a brief working session, we will give you a fresh approach to project management.

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About this whitepaper

This introductory paper is intended to provide a high-level overview of project management elements you may want to consider on projects. This is the first paper in a series that will provide in depth examples of projects we've delivered on for our clients. If you have an idea for a future paper or a topic you would like to learn more about, please reach out to us using the methods listed above.

About Loft9

Loft9 Consulting is a management consulting firm that provides business analysis, project management, change management, and process improvement across the entire business lifecycle -- from envisioning to deploying and optimizing.

At Loft9, we're as focused on the expertise we deliver as on the experience we create. Our clients get fresh thinking, sincere partnerships, and elevated outcomes. Together, Loft9 is able to be there for our clients, at the right time, with the right resource, consistently producing great results. That's the Loft9 experience.

We actively collaborate with and leverage the knowledge of other Loft9 Associates for the benefit of clients. Co-Delivery™ is our "secret sauce." Co-Delivery™ helps provide a quicker ramp time and the highest quality in delivery. We pair every Associate on an engagement with someone else from within the firm who has relevant experience in the space. More than just a check-in, Co-Delivery™ leverages experience and knowledge to bring additional resources to bear each and every week for the benefits of our clients and our delivery.

Our clients keep coming back to us year after year. When we ask them why, they mention our expertise and the results we deliver, but it always comes back around to the quality of our people.

They say that when you're working with Loft9, it's the intangibles, it's the communication, it's the way we collaborate and deliver.

It's the experience.