Top tips for managing projects by political finance oversight institutions

Understanding the following ten principles will give you a good sense of how, in general, to approach project management.

Know why you're doing it. Your project should have a business case setting out the reasons, benefits, costs, timescales, methods, assumptions, desired outcomes and 'target audience' (or users) of the end product of the work. Being clear about this at the beginning will help to ensure that everyone involved in delivery has a shared view of the aims and methods, to avoid resource clashes or misunderstandings farther down the line.

Planning. Don't underestimate the value of this – doing this well will save you a lot of pain during delivery. Have a clear project plan, and be prepared to invest some time thinking about the business case and preparing for the project before you actually begin work. Make use of your plan daily throughout delivery, and consider how best to amend the plan in the event of any changes that occur mid-project.

Know who has the authority. Ideally you should set up a small Project Board (or your organisation may already have a Programme Board that considers regular reports from all projects). Your Board is separate from your project team and will contain people with executive authority over the project. As Project Manager, you should report progress to them, and refer decisions and problems to them as needed. Having this structure and governance in place will ensure accountability and control. There should also be role clarity within the project. Who is the Sponsor (leader) who will ensure that the project is delivering against the business case? Who is the Project Manager (the person who leads and coordinates delivery and reporting)? And who are the team members (people who will need to carry out tasks within the project)?

Build quality into your project from the beginning – have some measurable quality criteria by which you can evaluate the benefits of the project at the end. Doing this at the start will help you to understand what you are really trying to achieve.

Martial your resources. Before you start, make sure that those in authority are able to commit the resources (people, funding, equipment) which you will need to finish the work, at the time you will need them. There is no point in starting the work if you can't ensure the resources to finish it. Even if *you* are the only resource involved, it is still important to check that you will be given the time you need to complete the work.

Define the stages of work and say what their timescales and outcomes should be – that way you will maintain control, and you will know when you've finished one part of the work and are ready to move onto the next.

Keep in communication with your Project Board, if only to tell them that everything is going according to plan. That way everyone can see the progress that is being made, and you can manage any changes and problems which crop up along the way. In any case, it doesn't do any harm to keep people aware of the ongoing work you are doing, especially if it is a long project whose final results won't see the light of day for some time.

Keep an eye on the scope and timescales of the work. Don't let things spiral out of control. If things start to deviate from your original plans, you should point this out to your Sponsor and your Project Board and ask for their advice… or make a recommendation of your own as to how you would ideally like to solve the problem. They may be willing to add more resources, or to use their authority to restrict the scope of the project to your original specification, or even to extend the timeline. 'Scope creep', when new work elements are added mid-project without adequate consideration, is often symptomatic of the need for another, separate, piece of work – you could include this as a follow-up suggestion after your project is finished, rather than trying to take the new work into your project without sufficient up-front resources and planning. Giving in to scope creep is likely to jeopardise your success, even if the suggestion for additional work is a really good one.

Risk management and learning from mistakes. Try to identify any potential risks (e.g. a supplier could let you down, disrupting your timetable) - and consider whether you can prevent, reduce, or transfer this risk in some way. If not, then make sure you have a contingency plan. It is also a good idea to keep a note of 'lessons learned' - things you perceived in retrospect to have been a mistake or something you overlooked and wish you'd thought of earlier – you or others may be able to learn from this when doing future projects.

Don't forget to manage the end of the project. Firstly, make sure it does have a proper end… and after you have delivered the outcomes you were aiming for, do a final brief report letting your Project Board know that the project has successfully completed. This is also the time to make any recommendations which have occurred to you about future work. And of course, don't forget to evaluate the project's benefits at the end, using the quality criteria you set at the beginning. If all the benefits are not realised, it's important for future projects that you understand why.