Although there has been considerable improvement in delivering on IT projects in the past decade, successful ones are still considered the exception rather than the rule. Many factors have contributed to this dismal IT project track record, but none is more to blame than a lack of leadership.

Conceptually, leadership and management theories have antithetical premises. But principally, they are inextricably linked. Someone cannot be a good leader without some essential management skills. Conversely, an aspiring project manager will not succeed without leadership ability.

Project managers must develop a sense of mission by effectively measuring how each project contributes to the goals and objectives of the organization. Additionally, project managers also must learn to control the bottom line when leading a complex project. Finally, these managers must effectively navigate the political landscape by understanding the needs of the organization’s power brokers as well as forming strong “early” bonds with key system users and front-line personnel.

Mission Mindfulness

Project managers must develop a sense of organizational ownership by effectively measuring how each project contributes to the strategic objectives of the organization. When project managers develop an ownership role, they need to look past the problem for the answer. Although a well-defined problem statement is an important guideline, it does not answer the more important question: “Why are we doing what we are doing?” In their ownership roles, project managers should act as direct representatives of senior management for the project and must manage any organizational impact the project may have.

Thus, project managers must continuously define and redefine how project outcomes will align with the long-term objectives of the organization. Particularly, project managers should be primarily concerned with how well IT integrates and aligns with the long-term goals of the organization as well as the short-term objectives of the project.

Bottom Line Awareness

Because many IT projects ultimately will affect an organization’s bottom line, project managers must have a keen understanding of how the organization defines success. That can be a challenge, because many project managers have a strong technical background but lack basic knowledge of business management.

To initiate a project, its proponents must make a sound business case to accept it by defining how success will be measured. At a minimum, project managers should take into consideration what critical success factors will be used to help quantify project success. To do this, they proactively should identify project and departmental impact; identify project and organizational goal alignment opportunities; assess the reasonableness of project and schedule timelines;
analyze project resource requirements; and develop project and risk mitigation strategies. Early efforts in these areas will uncover all issues, opportunities, and potential project pitfalls before they are missed and become showstoppers.

After a project is under way, project managers must apply sound financial management principles by developing a working budget and managing the costs of the project. Although most IT projects have a great deal of technical guidance, the ultimate measure of success will be determined by how well project managers control time, cost, and quality factors. As a result, sound business practice is a fundamental requirement for all phases of project management.

Political Awareness

Ignoring the political component of project management is another contributor to IT project failure. Many project managers are consummate project technicians, but they fail to navigate the political landscape that exists in many complex healthcare enterprises.

Some IT projects, such as advanced clinical application systems, will affect virtually every process, business line, and decision maker in the organization. When projects have this kind of wide-ranging impact, key players in the organization must believe they are being included and considered in the “who gets what, when, where, how and why” decision-making process. Therefore, project managers must prepare a political game plan for managing important sponsors, stakeholders and constituents to mitigate project derailment.

According to Penn State’s Jeffrey Pinto, a renowned expert in project management, “An understanding of the political side of organizations and the often intensely political nature of high-technology project implementation gives rise to the concomitant need to develop appropriate attitudes and strategies that help project managers operate effectively within the system.”

Pre-Partnering

One political strategy is pre-partnering. Clearly and comprehensively identifying user specifications and system requirements is key to project success. A thorough quality planning process (requirements gathering) is a critical success factor that is rarely given enough attention.

One of the biggest reasons why IT projects fail is because project teams do not spend enough time in the trenches with front-line users, ferreting out key “must-have” features for new systems. To do this effectively, project managers must cultivate strong relationships between the IT project team, users, and stakeholders to ensure user needs and expectations are under constant focus and review. Researchers have correlated IT project success with early collaboration between IT analysts, end users, and those who have a high stake in the outcome of a project. If project managers want to succeed, they first should find out how stakeholders define success. By securing these relationships early in the implementation process, project managers can define a clear roadmap for success by identifying potential areas of conflict and risk. This will help secure a strong commitment from users for quality planning, by defining all key requirements; quality assurance, by making sure all requirements are built into the design; and quality control, by verifying the requirements meet or exceed user and stakeholder expectations.

Enterprise project managers must always look first to the organization’s goals and objectives to build a roadmap for success. After these goals are clear, a tactical plan should be developed to manage the day-to-day issues that can quickly derail any large project, such as cost, resource management, and other risks.
However, nothing outweighs effective relationship management. Project managers must engage the organization’s power brokers as well as the project’s primary owners and users to get an early perspective on their diverse but essential needs.

Careful consideration of long-term project alignment and detailed requirement satisfaction are both key critical success factors for enterprise project management. Managing these issues effectively will be the ultimate challenge for healthcare IT project managers.

The Winter 2007 issue of the Journal of Healthcare Information Management contains a collection of special interest columns and articles that focus on process improvement. In this issue, there are several examples, strategies, opinions and case studies that will be of interest to healthcare leaders who are in the midst of managing process improvement and other project management related initiatives.

These articles include: Quality and Efficiency Successes Leveraging IT and New Processes; Business Process Optimization for RHIOs; IT Management and Governance Systems and Their Emergence in Healthcare; Partnering with Clinical Providers to Enhance the Efficiency of an EMR; and Showing ‘What Right Looks Like’: How to Improve Performance through a Paradigm Shift Around Implementation Thinking. These contributions and case studies provide useful knowledge and best-practice examples on advanced process improvement and project management techniques.

In addition, special interest columns and articles provide valuable information and insight on various topics, including: Rewarding Improvement: Unintended Consequences of Pay-for-Performance; The Definitive Evolution of the Role of the CIO; The Consumer-Centric Personal Health Record—It’s Time; Nursing at a Crossroads—Education, Research, Training, and Informatics; and Decoding the Maintenance and Support Agreement.

Finally, I would like to thank the professional staff at HIMSS, the peer reviewers and the JHIM editorial review board for all the behind-the-scenes work that goes into producing each issue. JHIM continues to look for new ways to provide relevant, important and useful information for healthcare professionals, academicians and HIMSS members. If you have any comments or suggestions that could help us improve in any way, please feel free to e-mail me at rdlang@know-power.com.

About the Author
Richard D. Lang, EdD, is the editor of the Journal of Healthcare Information Management and CIO of Doylestown Hospital in Pennsylvania.

References