
Using Potential Problem Analysis to Manage a Plan

Purpose

To apply Potential Problem Analysis to the overall management of a complex, multi-functional plan.

Introduction

Preparing a plan to implement an important project or decision calls for Potential Problem Analysis to assure the success of that plan. In these situations, you need to think beyond the various details to protecting the plan. Use Potential Problem Analysis to coordinate the workings of the separate parts, and to assure their final integration into a successful master plan.

Typically, a management function or project team develops an overall plan. Responsibility is then assigned for its various parts. At this stage, the project team can jointly detail a project plan or the assigned resources can develop a plan for their particular responsibility.

In the introduction of a new product, for example, the production manager might develop a subproject plan for implementing the production aspects—and perform a Potential Problem Analysis on that subproject. The sales manager might do the same for the sales segment, the distribution manager for the distribution segment, and so forth.

However, if project coordination were to cease at that point, there would be no assurance that loose ends would be tied. Potential problems might not be anticipated when the parts of the project are integrated. Responsibility must be assigned and resources allocated to implement the actions indicated by a Potential Problem Analysis.

The following are key elements in the coordination of any plan. They are areas where potential problems can be anticipated.

Interface

Even though the individual parts of a plan are well executed, the overall plan often can break down where these parts meet. Potential problems can arise at these interfaces between functions, individuals, operations, departments, subsystems, etc. Certain tasks may depend on a great many other tasks for completion, or a single task might directly precede several other tasks. In both cases, these tasks are sources for potential problems.

Clear Responsibility

Many plans run into difficulty because responsibilities are not clearly assigned and agreed. It is not unusual for an individual or function to assume wrongly that another individual or function has a particular responsibility. Clarify these responsibilities in

advance to uncover potentially confusing areas. Individuals often contribute more to a task if a sense of ownership is felt.

Timing

Since each resource is working against individual deadlines, project deadlines among functions must be compatible. Complete a Potential Problem Analysis to ensure proper coordination is planned. Look for tasks with particularly tight deadlines. Tasks with uncertain time estimates are also a source of potential problems.

Information Network

All organizations have procedures for information exchange, communication, feedback on results, etc. Existing communication and feedback procedures may create potential problems for a particular plan. Decide what special, one-time procedures are needed for the plan. Then deduce what could go wrong with them.

Key Persons in the Plan

Another area of concern is when key people involved in the plan become unavailable. Scheduling conflicts, competing projects, functional responsibilities, and motivation can all impair their effectiveness or even cause them to leave the project. Complete a Potential Problem Analysis to adjust the schedule to protect these resources.

Experience with the Work

Any part of the plan where technology, procedures, methods, or practices are new to those doing the work should be reviewed for potential problems. Time and cost estimates, performance standards, expectations, etc., may not be accurate. Review the plan for areas where you have resident expertise. Knowledge and experience with a task can be a source for identifying and addressing potential problems.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. However, it does highlight some unique Potential Problem Analysis areas for the project manager to consider.

Instructions

1. Think of a situation where you have the overall responsibility for the success of a plan that involves other functions or people. This may be an on-the-job plan to implement a new decision such as an organizational change, a product introduction, or a plant start-up. Or, this may be a plan to maintain an on-going part of your operation under changing circumstances such as processing a significant rush order, renegotiating a major contract, a realignment of territories. Or, it may be a plan for a community activity. Refer to a current project plan or describe the plan here.

2. Using a Potential Problem Analysis worksheet, perform an analysis on your overall management responsibility for the success of that plan. If working in a group, use a method to keep the analysis visible to everyone. Use the deliverables identified in the project plan as areas of vulnerability. Select a part of the plan that concerns you most.

3. Prepare for a brief discussion with your project team on the work you have done on your plan:

- a. How can the team help in completing the analysis?

- b. What changes to the project plan are indicated? Who will make the changes? When will they make them?
