

## Kicking It Off

*By Steven P. Blais, PMP*

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In American football, the game does not start until the ball is kicked. The kickoff marks the end of the planning and preparation and signals the start of the real business of winning the game.

A project kickoff meeting is similar. The business case and project charter have been prepared, initial project decisions have been made, project sponsors and funding have been identified, team members have been assigned, and the project goal and business objectives have been determined. The project kickoff meeting, which is held for the project team of stakeholders and technical personnel, serves the following purposes:

- Introduces players
- States product scope and project scope
- Publicly demonstrates management support for the project and its outcome
- Sets expectations – what the stakeholders can expect of the technical personnel and what the technical personnel can expect of the stakeholders
- Formally launches the project

However, the underlying – and primary – goal of the project kickoff meeting is to get everyone working on one team, running the same plays, and motivated and committed to project success. This meeting may be the first and last time all the team members get together face-to-face (or virtually face-to-face).

With that in mind, let's look at some typical meeting behaviors and what we can do to increase the chances that the entire team will walk out of this kickoff meeting with a winning attitude.

### Coming Together

Consider the typical meeting: business people on one side of the table and technical people on the other side. When the attendees line up with a table – a no man's land – between them, no amount of inducement for collaboration and cooperation will sound convincing.

Have your technical people arrive early and disperse them around the table. Do not let them group together. When the business people arrive, they will be forced to sit among the technical people. You may notice some resistance, as the later group may ask the earlier attendees to move seats to accommodate their grouping efforts. Emphasize, firmly and politely, that participants should sit anywhere, that the meeting will not last that long anyway.

Everyone now feels that they are part of a larger team – not two separate groups working together.



## Everyone Plays a Role

Meetings often have attendees who are not interested in being there for various reasons. This disinterest easily spreads to the rest of the participants. To avoid this trap, ensure that everyone who is asked to attend has a role to play in the project and that role was defined before the meeting.

Also, ensure that no one attends the meeting who does not have a role – no observers allowed.

To reinforce this guideline and to develop more team collaboration, during introductions have each person state his or her role in the project: “Hi, I’m Alice and I’ll be writing the code.” “Hi, I’m Sam from accounting, and I’m helping to define the requirements.”

## Separate the Product from the Project

Once the team’s roles have been established, introduce the business problem that the project is going to solve. State the problem in the negative: “We do not have the software to support the new product line”. You can see how this pronouncement has more punch and immediacy than simply stating, “We need new software for the new product line.”

Then state the vision for the project: “We have an automated support system that will allow significant sales from the new product line.” Ask the business manager or an executive to present this short section of the meeting to show management support.

By presenting the problem and then the vision, you begin by presenting the goal that everyone will be striving for – they will deliver a product, not just complete a project. It also establishes the product separately from the project and allows discussion about the project’s purpose (the product) to be aired first. There should be none.

Then, the project manager can present the project constraints. Basically, the project manager says, “We are going to produce this product by this day with these resources.” It is not necessary or wise to get into a discussion about the budget at this point.

## Risky Business

Usually during a kickoff meeting, the project manager is reluctant to bring up the subject of risk. Only positive vibrations and gung-ho enthusiasm are allowed – with no consideration of anything that might go wrong.

Assuming that at this point, you, as project manager, have identified a preliminary set of risks in the project, announce these openly. Bringing up risks during the kickoff meeting has the following benefits:

- Shows everyone that some risk analysis has been done
- Shows everyone the importance of risk management
- Introduces the risks so that they are on everyone’s mind throughout the project
- Gets everyone thinking about other risks so that risk management is easier

## Present the Process

The kickoff meeting is not a project plan review meeting. If you want everyone to review the project plan, pass it out at the end of the meeting and ask them to read it later.

The kickoff meeting is about the process of solving the problem, the process that describes what all team members do and when they do it. The process lets everyone know what is expected of them and what they can expect of all the other team members.

Spend as much time as necessary reviewing the process that defines who does what, when, and with whom. Ensure that everyone understands their part in the project's successful execution.

For many team members, this part of the meeting is review because they helped you lay out the process with Work Breakdown Structures and activity diagrams. Yet, this is the time when everyone *together* ratifies the process and agrees that it will bring success.

## Gain Commitment

A typical kickoff meeting ends as most meetings end – with the project manager asking for questions and comments and giving everyone a chance to voice objections. When the questions, if any, are dispatched, the project manager ends the meeting by acknowledging that the assembled group is committed to the project. This commitment, however, is passive. It only allows the project manager to say later when there is a problem, “You had your chance to speak up at the kickoff meeting.”

A better approach is to actively seek commitment from each team member. Ask around the table if each team member is ready and willing to take part: “Alice, do you think you will be able to code this in the time frame?” “Sam, does this all make sense? Can you put together the accounting requirements for us?” And so forth. This public commitment increases the excitement for the project, and that excitement will carry on into the project execution. If anyone resists making a personal commitment, this is the time to address it – not later in the project. It can be discussed and resolved in the meeting or afterwards in private.

## Walking Away with a Smile

Close the kickoff meeting with a positive statement of intent: “Looks like we have a winner here. Let's do it!” As basketball player Bill Walton said, “Winning is about having the whole team on the same page.” The kickoff meeting gets everyone on the team on the same page – the first step in a winning game.



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Steve Blais, PMP, is a consultant and educator living in Sarasota and Key West, Florida. He has worked for forty years in the field of computing. He currently works with companies to create and improve their business analysis processes. Steve is the author of the IIL Business Analysis series of courses and the forthcoming book, *The Beginning and End of Software Engineering: A Guide for the Business Analyst*.