



✉ [send to friend](#) | 🌐 bookmark this page (Ctrl+D) | 🖨 [printer friendly](#) | 📄 [purchase reprint](#)

GoBridges.com Column: CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS | Posted: Wednesday, February 21, 2007

Super project managers

R. Craig Finley, P.E.

A growing part of our firm's workload is consulting on ongoing or completed bridge projects. We're usually called in to help fix things that went wrong during the design and construction phases. For the vast majority of these projects, the main reason behind the failure was poor project management.

In baseball, they say you can never have enough pitching. In the design and construction industry, I believe you can never have enough good project managers (PMs). The PM is the single most important person on a major bridge project; he or she is the key to success.

What makes a PM good? Most successful PMs that I've encountered in this industry share a number of qualities. They have strong leadership and management skills, can communicate well, and understand the importance of doing so frequently and openly. PMs must be solid technically, but also know how to market both internally and externally.

Outstanding PMs have the commercial skills necessary to describe—succinctly and intelligently—all aspects of the project and its progression. They are advocates for the project, remaining clearly focused on and committed to delivering on the promises made by the project team. They lead and motivate the team, but more by delegating and supporting others than by doing all the work.

Ideal PMs have exceptional time-management and organization skills. They control budgets and scheduling with no excuses for write-offs and missed deadlines, develop and execute complete work plans, close out projects effectively and efficiently, and build relationships with clients that could lead to additional work. The best PMs are decisive, not timid or slow to act. They face challenges head-on and overcome them.

I call a project manager with these attributes a "Super PM." They are a rare and valuable find in our business.

Above it all, these Super PMs understand and respect the importance of planning and follow-through. On the kind of large, complex bridge projects in which we get involved, the lack of one or both of these key ingredients usually results in some kind of failure.

Super PMs know that managing the project starts long before the project does. A basic principle at our firm is to "plan the work and work the plan." This means establishing clear expectations and requirements for all team members; developing an aggressive, but realistic schedule; ensuring that the right resources are in the right places; and defining the key deliverables for each phase of the project.

The work plan, budget, and schedule are the best tools for helping a PM keep a project on track. Developing and integrating these tools is a crucial step in successful bridge project management.

Work plan—The work plan is a written, in-depth description of who, what, when, where, and how. It must include technical requirements and criteria, the scope of services, staffing roles, and responsibilities. It must also offer processes for quality and document control, schedules/milestones, and a proposed approach to the project.

The work plan should be in a format that is easily transferred, shared, and updated. It should include an organization chart, information about all subconsultants, contact information for all involved parties, and agreed-upon methods for project oversight and quality control/quality assurance.

The work plan defines macro issues such as the project description and scope, as well as more detailed factors such as the kind of software to be used, codes and standards affecting the project, and a description of all deliverables. The PM must ensure that the work plan includes details, rather than generalities and vague statements.

Budget—The budget must address personnel costs and man-hours, as well as overhead and profit. Budgeting and cost control information should be detailed for all phases and labor categories as dictated by the scope of services and schedule. Job cost accounting systems can aid budget and cost controls. Our firm uses Axium Pro-Trax, but there are other good ones out there.

Schedule—A schedule must have milestones, but the best schedules will apply those milestones directly to scope items. In addition to production milestones, the schedule should dictate when reviews should occur.

PMs need to know how these processes contribute to the ultimate success of the project, how they work, and how to integrate all their components thoroughly. A schedule that is integrated with the budget and work plan is the PM's most effective tool. It allows for continual monitoring of all important aspects of the project.

The good news is that you can always measure a PM's value in a clear and simple way—was the project a success or not. Having a Super PM on the team can be the difference, particularly on large, complex bridge projects.

R. Craig Finley, P.E., is the president of Finley Engineering Group in Tallahassee, Fla.

SEARCH GoBridges.com

GO

WELCOME

- Home Page
- About GoBridges.com

EDITORIAL

- Current Issue
- Browse Issues
- Search
- Feature Archive
- Column Archive
- Bridges E-Zine alerts
- Be a Contributor
- Reprints

RESOURCES

- Event Calendar
- Industry Links
- Professional Development
- Industry Careers
- Classifieds

ADVERTISING

- Information

CONTACT US

- Editorial
- Advertising

NEWS & VIEWS

- [Bentley acquisition](#)
- [Dancing bridges could be earthquake safe](#)
- [Bridge collapse triggers quick response](#)
- [Events](#)
- [More news](#)

SPONSORED BY

THE journal for A/E firms

For the business of design and rehabilitation

Your online bridge industry resource

SUBSCRIBE FREE TODAY!