The Definition of Done – Don't Take It for Granted

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When you think of something being *done*, i.e. completed, what do you think of? Do you think of a project where the bulk of the work has been performed or one where all of the work, including post-project clean-up and documentation, has been completed? Do you think about the unseen details being taken care of or just the visible tasks that support the tangible project outcome?

You might have a clear definition of done in your mind and think that most people share a similar perspective, but if you ask others for their definition, you will discover many different views. As unambiguous as the word *done* seems, it carries many different connotations. The meaning depends on people's role, responsibilities, situation, abilities, values, motivation, and personality.

In the domain of agile iterative software development, the terminology "Definition of Done" (DoD) is commonly used. It reflects a potentially shippable software feature or release that has achieved the checklist of agreed upon value-adding activities. These activities include the completion of design, development, testing, quality inspection, and documentation. It is an approach intended to enhance quality and hasten software release schedules.

Yet even in the agile software development domain, there are differences of opinion regarding the DoD. From the perspective of the conventional agile software developer, the DoD doesn't necessarily include user acceptance confirmation. Users, however, consider their acceptance to be a key element on the completion checklist. In the domain of building construction, the definition of done not only includes having a customer confirm that all the elements of the project are complete, but also that the full statement of work has been satisfied. In corporate change initiatives, the DoD typically includes validation that new habits have been formed, behaviors have been permanently changed, and the return on investment has been achieved.

Stephen R. Covey's habit #2 in his best-selling book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is "Begin with the end in mind." He knew that having a definition of done at the beginning of a project is critical to its success. Yet as wise as his advice is, it doesn't guarantee alignment between people on the details of what the end looks like or how to get there.

Not only is agreeing on the definition of done an issue, so is the execution of getting there. Unfortunately, the end result from an overall project performance standpoint—studies find that three-fourths of projects don't achieve their intended results within their initial budget and schedule. In other words, the vast majority of projects run over budget, miss their deadline, and don't achieve their desired outcome. Not only do people not agree on the definition of done, they don't achieve it as originally conceived.

Delivering results on schedule and budget is a great challenge, particularly as the scope of a project increases. Achieving desired outcomes depends on many variables. However, agreeing on the definition of done at the beginning is doable and significantly improves the odds of success. Everyone involved in a project can have a common view of the desired outcome. The project sponsor and project manager can cast a vivid vision and set clear direction. They can rally everyone around a cogent strategy, assign available resources, facilitate a detailed plan, allocate a sufficient budget, and define the metrics of success that will be tracked. When they do, the challenge in the project then becomes execution rather than understanding what is to be done and how it will be measured.

If your work, project, product, deliverable, or initiative doesn't have a clear definition of done, stop to ensure that it does. Prevent the waste of time and money that comes with doing work on that which people don't have agreement. Bring everyone together including those doing the work, impacted by the work, and who approve the work. Ensure everyone has a common vision as well as agreement on the specific attributes that enable the vision.

Here is a checklist of elements to consider putting in your definition of done, many of which are commonly overlooked, yet are critical to achieving a desirable outcome:

- A specific statement of the problem being solved or opportunity being leveraged.

- The expected impact (e.g. benefits, ROI) of solving the problem or leveraging the opportunity.

- Examples and stories that give meaning to the desired outcome.

- Metrics to be used to measure the success of the outcome.

- The consequences to be implemented for achieving or not achieving the desired outcome.

- Acceptance criteria that satisfies the stakeholders including end-users, owners, and support personnel.

- Assumptions, constraints, decisions made, decision triggers should new decisions be needed, and contingencies—all of which prevent people from having foggy memory when old debates are rekindled.

- A detailed project plan with milestones, key enabling activities, owners, resources, and due dates.

- Project wind-down activities and deliverables that may not be explicitly defined in the project such as:
  - Documentation including notes on the design, as built, installation, usage, and support.
  - Training on how to install, use, support, sell, and update whatever was produced.
  - Completion of "punch list" items including fixing defects and facilities clean-up.
  - Return of equipment, maintenance of equipment, upgrade of applications, update of templates and libraries.
  - Submission of invoices, payment of bills, transfer of funds, payment of commissions, and collection of money.
  - Completion of post-project review to understand what worked well and what didn't.
  - Promotion (advertising) of the job well done, recognition, and celebration of the project completion.

- Assignment of ownership for ongoing activities such as maintenance, upgrades, and warranty claims.

- Ongoing measurements, resource allocation, and accountabilities that ensure results, behaviors, and outcomes are sustained.

Consider these when aligning your team on a common definition of done and enjoy the higher likelihood that your project will finish on schedule, on budget, and to specification.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of Activating *Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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