

The Power Of Decision Planning

Source: Life Science Leader

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Leaders in life science organizations do considerable strategic planning to ensure the success of their organization. Strategic planning often includes organization priorities planning, portfolio planning, resource planning, project planning, and succession planning to name a few. We incorporate organization/project activities, milestones, people resources, financial resources, and many other inputs into our planning tools. So why do so many talented strategic planners not include decision points in their planning tools?

Almost every time new data or other information becomes available, a decision will need to be made. Incorporating key decision points into planning tools and assigning the decision rights helps the team to understand and prepare for these decisions. More importantly, it gives decision makers time to think through potential scenarios beforehand and removes the emotional aspects that can occur while making the decision by providing clear goals, clear ownership, and rapid decision making by scheduling the decision meeting in advance.

WHAT IS DECISION MAPPING & PLANNING?

Decision mapping and planning is the process of systematically analyzing, evaluating, and preparing for decisions that will need to be made. When your project manager creates the Gantt chart of activities, there are items that will generate information that will enable decisions to be made. Some examples include toxicology data, clinical study data, process-development study outcomes, analytical method development outcomes, and stability data. Each time new data arrive, there is an opportunity to make decisions to progress the project.

Mapping and planning strategic and financial decisions for executives is a critical aspect of effective management and leadership, especially in dynamic environments like startups and with projects that have high uncertainty. For executives, there are many strategic and financial decisions that can be mapped and planned, including next steps when clinical data become available, receipt of regulatory agency feedback, or changes to the funding plan. For example, funding burn rates in startups dictates the timepoint where decisions regarding pursuit of additional funding, scale back of activities, or other courses of action will be required. The timing of these decisions can be predicted and mapped.

Executives need to align their decisions with the overarching strategic goals of the organization. By mapping out key decision points in advance, they can ensure the decisions made are consistent with the company's mission, vision, and long-term objectives. Anticipating critical decision points allows executives to proactively manage risks and promote data-driven decision making. They can plan for potential scenarios, develop contingency plans, and allocate resources accordingly. By planning decision points, executives can allocate resources efficiently and make informed choices about where to invest or scale back.

APPLICATION

New product project teams are one group that can benefit most from decision planning and mapping. Most project teams contain at least one project manager who is highly skilled in planning, creating Gantt charts, and managing the schedule of activities for project success. A typical Gantt chart will contain tasks, assignments, and milestones for the project. Many tasks and milestones generate data or other information at their completion that will be used to make decisions. Most of these decisions can be anticipated ahead of time. With a little forethought, these decisions can be mapped and planned.

The best practices for incorporating decision planning and mapping for projects include:

1. Make a list of decisions that will need to be made during the project. List that data and information required to make that decision.
2. During the project planning process, while constructing a Gantt chart or other planning tool, identify all points where data or other information becomes available.
3. Include the decisions as an action item on the Gantt chart or other planning tool. Most decisions require multiple inputs; plan discussion time when each piece of the information becomes available. If a meeting is required, schedule it well in advance.
4. More sophisticated users will list the likely choices based on the anticipated data and information outcomes to help the team prepare for likely scenarios.
5. Update decision action items each time the project schedule is updated. Add new decision action items as they arise and delete items that are no longer relevant.

BENEFITS

Decision mapping and planning is an investment in your endeavor that enhances strategic planning and promotes good project planning skills. The benefits of decision mapping and planning include:

1. **Project Management Benefits:** Decision mapping and planning can help project managers and teams better prepare for critical decision points throughout a project's life cycle. By integrating decision-making into the project-planning process, teams can avoid last-minute rushes to make choices without proper consideration and analysis. This approach can lead to informed decisions that are aligned with project goals.
2. **Enhanced Communication:** Incorporating decision points in project plans allows improved communication among team members, stakeholders, and decision makers. Everyone involved becomes aware of when and what decisions are on the horizon, fostering a coordinated and well-prepared decision-making process.
3. **Mitigating Emotional Reactions:** Planning decisions in advance helps reduce the emotional element often associated with unexpected decisions. By anticipating decision points and outlining potential courses of action, individuals can approach the decision-making process with a clearer and more rational mindset.
4. **Strategic Alignment:** For executives and higher-level decision makers, decision mapping and planning can ensure that strategic decisions are well-coordinated with project timelines and data availability. This alignment supports a seamless integration of strategic thinking and operational execution.
5. **Resource Management:** Incorporating decision points into project plans also can aid in resource allocation and risk management. For example, if a decision requires additional resources or specific expertise, planning ahead ensures that these requirements are considered and accounted for.
6. **Learning from Data:** Decision mapping encourages a data-driven approach to decision-making. It prompts teams to define the specific data and information needed to make informed choices and ensures that decisions are made based on available evidence.
7. **Continuous Improvement:** By updating decision action items as the project progresses, teams can adapt to changing circumstances and make timely adjustments to their plans. This flexibility is crucial for maintaining project momentum and adapting to unforeseen challenges.

I have used decision planning and mapping extensively throughout my career and continue to advocate it to my clients. In most cases, I encounter skepticism at first. It takes more effort during initial project planning to incorporate decision timepoints into a Gantt chart, but with a little practice the decision points will become as intuitive as the tasks and milestones. As the project proceeds, the invested time is paid back quickly through alignment of the team and clarity regarding who holds the decision rights. This is especially true when team membership changes over time. New members can better understand the project flow and any decisions they will be expected to make.

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