National Indian Health Board

Good Project Management = Effective Risk Management:
Project Management Lessons from the Field

Question: Why is risk management something I should even think about?

Answer: It is very easy while we are running our projects, to just focus on those deliverables written into our scopes of work, to hop on to calls with a project officer, to write the reports, and run the projects. Then when something happens – such as when a reliable staff member accepts a promotion and moves on to a new position– we are left with a huge hole in our project. While we are scrambling to fill that gap, we may fall behind in our deliverables, the groups stop running as they should be, reports and documentations are not completed as they once were, and the project begins to suffer. While these are hopefully temporary trials, the people who suffer the most are the people whom our projects serve – these are the people who lose the benefits of our projects when our projects falter.

Question: Isn't risk management something that only staff in the hospital should worry about?

Answer: In the public health field, risk management is often associated with clinical practices used to reduce the possibility of infection or cross-contamination. That is why staff in hospitals and clinics wear gloves, masks, watch their hands, etc. While the tenets are the same, when we speak about programmatic risk management, we are referring to a close examination of the *programmatic* practices, and asking ourselves two simple questions, 1.) What opportunities currently exist in our project that open us up to the possibility of risk, failure, misinterpretation, or wrong-doing, and 2.) What can we do to pre-emptively ensure that this never happens?

Question: How is risk management different from what I already do all day just managing our projects?

Answer: Most risk management strategies are nothing more than sound project management strategies. If project management is the process of planning, organizing, and managing resources in order to consistently and successfully implement project activities, then it stands to reason that risk management is the process of ensuring that the planning, organizing, managing of resources and implementation of activities run smoothly and without any barriers. So it is no different than what you are already doing, risk management is just looking at project management from a different perspective.

Question: My boss is always asking me to write things down and to save things. Is all of this documentation really necessary?

Answer: Staff may see routine documentation as a bureaucratic hurdle that they are forced to jump, and may view it as valuable time diverted from the provision of direct services or communication with the community. While, admittedly, documentation can be a tedious process, it is absolutely necessary for all public health programs. Documentation is what allows us to report back to our leaders, our funders, and the community and show them what we did, and why it is important to support the program (and the effort in general). Sound documentation can actually ease frustration by making it easier for all staff to find information when they need it.

Question: If filing and paperwork is so important, where should we keep everything?

Answer: A good practice is to centralize all project information either in a single file cabinet or in a single folder on a shared computer drive. This allows equal and ready access to all project staff or project evaluators. It also prevents one person from hoarding or controlling all of the data or information on a desktop computer or in their own office – where it can be hard to find when needed. Utilizing a shared folder on a common drive housed on a larger server also has an added protective benefit. The server is probably regularly backed up (either automatically or manually), whereas, desktop hard drives may not be backed up on the server. So if a desktop computer crashes or is infected with a virus, then there is a good chance that the data and files stored on the hard drive may be lost. Whereas data and files stored on a server are regularly backed up and easily recoverable.

It is important to create a filing system that all parties understand. A good practice is to create a single folder for the project on a computer or a designate a single drawer in a file cabinet. Then designate subfolders with easily understood and non-abbreviated titles, such as "Project Meetings," "Grant Reports," or "Participant Information." And the within each of these subfolders, create additional subfolders with equally clear titles. In this day and age, it is no longer necessary to abbreviate or shorten the names of files or documents, so simply title the documents what you would like everybody to call them. The exact style or layout of a filing system will vary from office to office, and taking time to walk each staff member through the logic of the filing system will help ensure that staff understand and are comfortable using it.

Question: When am I supposed to find time to do all of this documentation?

Answer: To help staff use both the systems of documentation and filing, look at the time spent on the project, and help project staff designate certain amounts of time either each day or each week dedicated to just documentation. Staff during this time may be allowed to turn off their phone, shut down their e-mail, or shut their door just so they can focus on typing up their notes for the week. By dedicated a set amount of time to the task, staff will begin to see that one hour spent on documentation is just as important as one hour spent facilitating a group.

Question: Our participants hate filling out all of the paperwork that we have to complete. What can I do?

Answer: When there is one sign in sheet for a group session, another format for a sign-in sheet for the community dinner, and then yet another sign-in sheet for the health fair booth, it can be cumbersome and confusing for staff to keep track of what form to use for which event. Tools, forms, and data collection instruments should be standardized across activities (and ideally across projects throughout the department). When there is only satisfaction survey to use regardless of the event, there is no chance that a new staff member will grab the wrong form when running out of the door. Not only do you minimize the possibility for error, but it also helps when compiling the information for reporting purposes – the familiarity with the form will ease data entry or interpretation and allow for the creation of templates for reporting and compiling the data.

In addition to standardizing tools, project staff should seek to combine as many instruments into a single document as possible to minimize the burden on project staff and project participants as well. That is to say, combining a knowledge pre-test with a demographic form and a contact information form into a single document means one document that staff needs to copy and staple, and pass out to project participants, rather than three.