

For 'Project' magazine, May 2005

People Leading Projects

– tough minded? socially adept? creative? ...**you bet!**

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Have you ever asked someone working on an ailing project why it is going down hill? Their answer will invariably refer to a leader group that has been unable to work together successfully. And when you ask about another project, a successful one this time, the focus is likely to be the same. They tell you about a leader group that is energetic, informed, focused on a common cause, and working closely as one.

This surely suggests that there needs to be a primary focus on improving project management performance through attention to organisational factors and to the way that professionals think, behave and relate to one-another. But no! Instead, the evident training and development emphasis today centres on prescribed processes, methodology and metrics. Investment in so-called 'soft' competences remains minimal in comparison. Further, we know that projects are too often constrained by the structures and culture of their host organisation. Projects thrive best in an organisation able to tolerate ambiguity and have some agility – where traditional-line authority is able to partner with a project's processes, objectives and cross-functional demands.

We believe that a more informed choice should now be made available to project management professionals for building organisational capability and raising the performance of people who manage projects.

Resolving issues and collaboration

A project is an agglomeration of tasks; each someone's responsibility. Value is added through the efforts of each of these individuals. But for these efforts to become integrated and useful, people must engage together, resolve issues collectively and collaborate. It lies in the quality of relationships and rapport that a project will build progressively or be frustrated. Managing stakeholders and their interests depends on the same social imperatives.

This is all instinctively understood by an accomplished project manager – they know that the root cause of both success and failure in projects is closely associated with behaviours, relationships and a range of personal, social and political factors. We refer here to these as the Human and Organisational Competencies; what we call 'HOCs'. You'll read more about HOCs later.

What is stopping us?

The issues of communication, leadership, agreement and disagreement, commonly pepper conversation between people working on projects. There is plenty of evidence from the collective experience of project managers that weaknesses in the way such issues are handled are getting in the way of progress; and quality too. Are we for some reason avoiding them? Are we caught in a paradigm of our own making, or is it all simply too difficult? We list here some of the reasons for this hesitation.

- Historically, project management methodologies and tools have focused on the adoption of structured processes and control measures; in preference to attention to human and organisation factors
- Project managers sometimes have a 'hard' or Theory X-Style orientation and this, as a trait, continues to be 'the style of choice' in some organisations
- HOCs are eclectic and subject to personal and cultural preferences. They are more difficult to scrutinise by objective analysis and they are unlikely to be favoured where a Theory X-Style culture prevails
- A prescription to modify the way we behave can be seen as a challenge to freedom and individuality. (The project manager is often someone inclined to 'make their own arrangements')
- HOCs, being subject to personal preference, cannot be learned in the same way as other elements of the PMBoK (e.g. training courses). HOCs are acquired through life experience and to accelerate this learning we must use coaching and other methods, customised to the learner
- The immaturity of project management as a profession, role models are not widely available.

We would value your opinion on the reasons for hesitation.

What is to be done?

It seems to us that an emphasis on HOCs is urgently required. As a profession, we need to articulate and share the value of HOCs to project performance and to a business's bottom line. And this renewed professional competence has to develop hand-in-hand with the development of project organisations.

The professional institutions need also to set new standards. They need to promote learning methods and programmes and above all recognise through their qualifications, those members able to show pre-eminence in their handling of human and organisational aspects of project and programme management.

Suggestions

Special Interest Group (SIG)

We hope that our ideas here prompt debate. The subject is an area now being examined by the APM's Teamwork and Culture SIG. Other issues on the agenda include:

- How project management can be more comprehensively embraced by an organisation's culture
- How to develop innovative approaches to improve personal and team performance
- How to assist project players to deploy and exploit, knowledge that is already known and understood about human behaviour
- How project management should be branded to appeal to a new generation of managers

- What is the future for project management, as it engages with changing social patterns and styles of working?

The SIG has an ambitious programme with fora planned for 2005/ 6. Please contact us with your observations and comments and/or if you wish to become involved with the work of the SIG.

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April 2005