

What *really* makes or breaks a project

Donnie MacNicol suggests that project managers shouldn't just concentrate on time, cost and quality



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Issues such as team conflict or project delays are often directly attributable to people who don't deliver, are unsupportive, hide mistakes and so on. Issues that are not directly attributable to people (such as contract delays or high levels of snagging) are then put down to specification, structure, process, systems, tools, contract, politics, etc.

But in each case, someone has designed, developed, maintained and interpreted each of these entities, i.e. people create the issues that make projects so challenging to deliver. What heightens these challenges is that PMs often only view the symptoms of problems when the true causes are, in fact, based around people's feelings of trust, belonging, etc.

Why then do PMs usually focus on monitoring time, cost and quality when they should concentrate on dealing with underlying problems?

Firstly, the 'unconscious incompetent' PM cannot differentiate between issues, symptoms or problems. Then there is the 'conscious incompetent' PM who believes it is not their role to deal with underlying people problems or who does not see the benefits of changing their approach. For the PM who is willing to change, they are typically unequipped or uncomfortable (possibly because of competence) to deal with these underlying people problems. Methodologies, tools, employment and training bias have historically focused on adopting structured processes and control measures rather than providing PMs with an understanding of people. Unfortunately, the latter is thought to be vague and intangible and cannot be learned in the same way as more familiar process-related competencies.

The challenge therefore is to identify practical actions so a PM can focus on people to help enhance project performance.

Firstly, understand yourself. How do you react to conflict? What motivates you? How do you make decisions? The numerous profiling tools such as Strengths Deployment Inventory or Myers Briggs Type Indicator provide a good basis. With these insights, you will be able to distinguish similarities and/or differences with another person's behaviour. Have you ever had a project with a 'bad apple' on the team who was negative, affected teamworking and disrupted project progress? Rather than considering your colleague to be a pain, you should identify the "why?" behind their actions. Understanding someone's drivers and motivations will make them, and the project, much easier to manage.

Next, share a little of who you are – your interests and passions. It is much harder to break a promise, be disruptive or be unsupportive if it is a *person* they are letting down rather than a PM job title. This differentiation between the person and the role also has the capacity to reduce tension and conflict and is very much in tune with the latest leadership thinking about the importance of openness and being yourself.

As a newly-enlightened PM, the next step is to find the real problems and deal with them rather than simply 'symptoms surfing'. This is done by performing a root cause analysis. A highly effective technique is to take on the persona of a child and repeatedly ask "Why?" However, while the underlying problems may be brought to the surface, the PM may be more comfortable relying on the traditional approach of tightening controls and increasing the level of monitoring. This is a wasted opportunity.

Project progress meetings often revolve around 'traffic light' status reports, but what percentage of the meeting time is spent identifying underlying people issues compared to time/cost/quality? Little or none?

So what can be done? Change the content and focus of reports and meetings to identify what is *actually* driving performance through simple subjective metrics. Examples include: assessing the level of buy-in and commitment of team members, the clarity and comfort of roles and responsibilities and the effectiveness of communication, decision-making and conflict resolution.

With time and practice, the metrics that most influence the performance of the project will surface and some level of objectivity be obtained. The relationship with the traditional performance measures of cost, time and quality will become evident as well as trends, e.g. low team morale may mean an overspend in a few months.

An appreciation of people-focused project management is becoming a pre-requisite of being a professional PM. Getting this right will help you influence the factors that *really* drive project performance.

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