

Project Management 101

By Marek Jakubik

One of the most popular activities of all time is to whine, cry, and otherwise complain about why large IT projects fail so frequently. In the sea of recommendations for improvements repeated ad nauseum, one suggestion is almost never given: Hire the best project managers you can find!

Many projects are indeed no-win propositions even for the best of the pros. Typically, such situations are caused by a major scarcity: of resources, of will, or of brains (at the decision-making levels). However, in quite a few circumstances even ill-defined projects can be rescued despite errors and omissions made upfront. I intend to argue the key to this salvation is the people we put in charge of the projects: the magnanimous project managers.

Forget PMO, Forget PMP

Hire good PMs. Since this piece of advice goes against the current tide of wisdom that tends to center not on people but on processes and standards, I feel it requires a few qualifying words. Yes, processes and standards are important, but they have to fit the size of the organization and, above all, be delivered with very high quality. Otherwise, while creating overhead, they can do even more damage. Most important, they should never overshadow the core principle—they should never be used as a substitute for the quality of the people we hire. Unfortunately, quite often they do.

To anyone who currently is considering creating a Project Management Office (PMO), I say this: If you are a large organization that needs to manage 15-plus major initiatives concurrently—go ahead. Your scale likely imposes a high degree of complexity in coordinating and communicating for which a well-managed PMO may be an answer.

As to the Project Management Professional designation—I have a few serious doubts. First, I do not believe an exam that requires three months of preparation, half of which is dedicated to a process of memorizing some rather obscure definitions and

terminology, is the correct test to certify someone's professional capability. To see what I mean, just compare it with the hurdles any Professional Engineer (PEng) has to pass. Four years of college, a minimum four years of practical experience (much more if you are educated and practiced outside of North America), and finally, an exam in law and ethics.

Second, PMP (at least in its current form) gives far too many people a shield to hide their ineptitude. Mediocrity loves to hide behind labels. Many HR departments, which incidentally, love processes and standards, already have begun using PMP as a first-line filter. It certainly eases their job, but it also crudely eliminates what is possibly the best talent.

By contrast, the best PMs are not known for their technical prowess nor the knowledge of project management jargon and techniques. Instead, it is their sense of ownership and mission, focus on relationships, and ability to influence that defines their excellence. And though PMP exams try to test for these skills, they mostly fail. They fail because at the soul of the best project managers lie not technical skills but character traits.

Wanted: Honest Bulldogs with a Grip on Reality

The late advertising genius David Ogilvy used these words to describe the talent he was seeking: "... rare trumpeter swans capable of inspiring a motley crew of writers and artists; they must be sure-footed judges for a wide range of different products; they must be good presenters; and they must have a colossal appetite for midnight oil." And so, inspired by Mr. Ogilvy, let's describe our heroes.

It is my strong contention the most successful project managers all show the following fundamental human traits:

- Attention to detail,
- Bulldog-like tenacity,
- Honesty and integrity, and
- Personal courage.

I put emphasis on “human traits” to direct your attention to the fact the best PMs (likely) behave in such a way as people, inside and outside the office. They live their lives that way. It is their inherent traits that manifest themselves in the context of managing projects as a set of behavioral competencies we like to describe as commitment, dedication, and leadership.

It is sometimes argued that project managers act as de facto mini general managers. Not really. While managing diverse projects can be an excellent preparation for the future general management job, the key difference is the scope and, therefore, focus of their activities. No general manager can afford to get involved in the daily activities hands-on. In contrast, project managers must.

Attention to detail and tenacity in pursuing the minutiae are mind-numbing and unpleasant activities to most people. The best PMs seem to thrive on them. Whether this is driven by their overwhelming sense of responsibility or some cluster of perverse synapses in their brains, I may never know. But they do it and do it consistently despite the pleas for mercy.

Such behavior cannot be sustained without a serious dose of personal courage. Large complex projects always involve political skirmishes, conflicts of interests, and cases of sub par performance, all of which having to be dealt with swiftly. It is the lack of such gut-level courage that often separates many otherwise competent PMs from the best ones.

Incidentally, there are aspects of a project organization that can help PMs to find their courage. Any design in which the PM’s direct line of accountability is disassociated from the project stakeholders will give him/her stronger

footing. A similar effect can be achieved by bringing a project manager from the outside, preferably on contract.

Honesty and integrity are the ribbons that tie it all together. Over the project’s time frame our PM-hero has to excel in performing a long list of relationship-based behavioral tasks such as asking, encouraging, cajoling, praising, rewarding, demanding, and manipulating. No one can survive this test intact unless consistently living by the highest standards of sincerity. The PM’s dedication and motivation to the singular mission, the success of the project, never can be questioned.

HR to the Rescue

If you agree with my thesis, it is time to present my usual advice. I suspect it readily should appeal to all CIOs for it is very straightforward: Ask your HR department for help. Sit down with the HR folks and explain the traits we just discussed. Adjust and polish them to fit your conditions, and let HR do what it should do best: Find the talent your company needs most. When you’re done, you will have added a new important element to your own competitive advantage (and your job security perhaps).

Complexity vs. Humans

Yes, humans have entered a stage in which the complexity that surrounds us often seems beyond our capacity to control it. We all know of uncounted cases of large projects that went awry. Major stadiums (I’m looking at one as I write this), city digs (anyone from Boston?), and new airports (any picks?)—they all experienced the infamous “over-time and over-budget” syndrome.

In the still young and constantly changing

field of IT, we are yet playing catch-up. Until our colleges and universities start mass producing PITPMs (Professional IT Project Managers), we have to help ourselves.

So, please remember: The behavioral skills of PMs cannot be learned by reading a book nor measured by a certification process based on a test. It is your sense of smell for talent or, more likely, a sophisticated, expert-supported process of selection that will lead you to them.

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