

The People Dimensions of Projects

P. Pearce and E. Robins

ProjectIQ, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

SUMMARY

The Project Management Body of Knowledge and our Australian Qualification's Framework describe the competencies required for successful project management. Considerable amounts of project management training focus on the "technical side" of these project management competencies - the scoping, work breakdowns, scheduling, controlling etc. These topics are essential and provide the "foundation" skills for project managers.

However, a critical success factor for successful project managers is their ability to deal with the people dimensions of projects. These so called "soft" skills are often the most difficult to master, yet from the concept through to effective implementation of projects they are crucial.

This presentation is intended to stimulate some critical thinking around:

- the impact of a deficiency of these people skills;
- the environment that "discourages" the development of these people skills; and
- suggested training solutions to support the development of skills to tackle the people dimensions of projects.

"Two plus two equals four until people get involved."

Author unknown

SUCCESSFUL PROJECT MANAGERS LEARN TO DEAL WITH PEOPLE

“The ability to deal with people is as purchasable a commodity as sugar and coffee. And I will pay more for that ability than any other under the sun.”

J.D. Rockefeller

Project management practitioners are typically good at understanding, absorbing, applying and executing the core methods, tools and techniques of project management. But, to translate the project intent onto project outcomes requires more than these “foundation skills.” It requires “people skills.”

There are many dimensions of people skills required when managing projects. These dimensions include:

- Understanding and correctly interpreting the needs and expectations of the external customers and the operations people who serve them
- Understanding, defining and communicating the impact of change on people in other parts of the organisation
- Understanding the interests, motivations, fears and drivers of project stakeholders and their own reactions to those factors
- Having the skills, knowledge and confidence to effectively present compelling arguments to influence project stakeholders
- Having the team leadership skills to understand, motivate, communicate with, coach, evaluate and lead their project teams, i.e. a high level of “emotional intelligence”.

The people skills are often referred to as the “soft skills.” As most people realise, this term is a misnomer as these skills are often the hardest to master. Consequently, project practitioners who lack the people skills, experience an adverse impact on personal and project performance.

Our experience is that many projects fail to meet performance targets because of these “people dimensions” rather than because of technical deficiencies. This is understandable when training and development of many project managers focuses on technical competencies but not on the people competencies. They need both.

Training, using active, participative approaches in a supportive group environment, must be re-focused to address the apparent gaps in many project managers’ skills inventory. In addition, organizational performance evaluation systems should recognize and reward demonstration of “emotional intelligence” and its positive impact on project performance and people development.

Once the core project management skills have been imparted, project managers should be supported in developing their skills in communication, team leadership, change management, performance coaching and people development, and presentation and influencing. The investment will be rewarded by greatly improved project performance.

THE HYPOTHESIS

1. Optimal project performance requires technical AND people skills.

To get the best project outcomes, our project managers must be competent in project management methodology and supporting tools such as software. They must have the “soft” skills, or “people” skills, or “emotional intelligence” to work with all the people who will in some way be involved in or impacted by the project – the project stakeholders of which there are many.

2. Technical oriented project managers usually perform and manage project processes well.

Most project managers with a technical background are good at project management processes – that’s their natural, methodical approach, reinforced by their chosen education and training paths.

3. Often project managers lack competence and confidence in “people skills.”

And here is the rash generalisation – a high proportion of project managers, especially those with a technical background, are not particularly strong on the “people” skills.” Lack of confidence in these areas may cause them to struggle with the people relationships required for project success.

4. Project performance suffers as a result.

Project performance and outcomes so often suffer, not from lack of technical skill, but from lack of “people” skills

5. People skills of many project managers require “upgrading.”

The conclusion from all these assertions is as follows. If we want better project outcomes, we must better invest in identifying and hiring project managers with “emotional intelligence” and/or invest in upgrading the “people” skills of our existing project managers and project teams.

PROJECT MANAGER INTERACTIONS

Project managers interact with many individuals and groups, such as: sponsor, executive team, project board, project team, contractors and vendors, their boss, key customers, other project managers, business analysts, testers, department heads, etc. We should note in relation to this point that:

- This is not an exhaustive list, and there could well be some duplication. For example, where the sponsor is part of the executive team and project board.
- All communication between project managers and their stakeholders must be two-way to be effective.
- Different forms of interaction will exist when dealing with such things as project issues, reports, meetings, negotiating, compromising, politicking, competing for resources, co-ordination, etc.

- A range of skills is required to handle all these interactions at least adequately and preferably with confidence and competence.
- Within the project team, all the usual leadership requirements exist – goal-setting, motivating, coaching, training, conflict resolution, performance management and evaluation, teamwork, delegation, follow-up, etc.
- At higher levels, requirements exist for activities such as: presenting compelling proposals to the board for funding, understanding the WIIFMs of key stakeholders, persuading them to attend key meetings and to read reports, negotiating resource allocation, contracting with suppliers, etc
- With “customer”, understanding their business, listening to needs and understanding requirements, getting good documentation, negotiating change requests and issues, etc. is required.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

If the project manager lacks skills and confidence in dealing with people, then communications break down. This creates a real risk that the project will suffer as people are starved of information.

In extreme (but not uncommon) cases, the project manager is acutely aware of their own shortcomings in these areas, but lacks the confidence to talk with stakeholders, avoids the discussion for fear of inadequacy and conflict, and “buries” or defers an issue, with potentially severe impact on the project.

How do things get to such a state? What is it about some people’s make-up, and our organisations’ selection, reward/recognition and training processes that mean that project managers may lack some of these basic competencies, so essential to success?

In his excellent book “Flawless Consulting”, Peter Block says: “Technical training (in such disciplines as computer science, engineering or accounting) so focuses your attention on facts, figures, data and the rational level, that you are not accustomed to closely paying attention to the interpersonal, emotional level of conversations.”ⁱ

WHY THE BREAKDOWN?

Typical Attributes

For those people who have undertaken some form of “personality profiling” will realise, often people who are goal driven, planning oriented and task focussed, often have these strengths at the expense of relationship oriented skills.

We are generalizing or even stereotyping, but often people who go into project management tend to be:

- Technically skilled
- Task-oriented

- Process-oriented
- Analytical, methodical
- Act on data and logic
- Focused on “technical solutions”

The attributes listed above are very useful, but people who are good at the “relationship side of the equation” tend to be better at:

- communicating
- developing rapport
- creating teamwork
- resolving conflicts
- influencing others
- focussing on customer requirements

As the ability to manage stakeholders is a critical success factor for projects, many project managers need to develop their relationship management attributes to support more effective project performance.

We can assist most project managers’ by supplementing their “technical training” in project management with the skills **and confidence** to deal with people.

OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

As organisations, we often contribute to the problem of “lop-sided” technical (and other) people, because:

1. Recruitment and selection

“Technical” managers recruit more specialists “like us”. Sometimes the focus on technical skills can result in the hire of sad cases of virtual social misfits.

2. Promotion, reward and recognition

Our performance evaluation and management system can reward and recognise technical skills without using a “balanced scorecard” approach to also reward critical people skills.

3. Lack of business acumen

“Technically-oriented” people may have no real understanding of the business they operate in – its products, markets, costs, pressures, customers, competitive position, etc. – and we do little or nothing to give them at least a general understanding of their organization, business and environment.

4. Chimney thinking and lack of customer focus

We reinforce (or at least fail to break down) functional chimneys – them against us – instead of promoting systemic thinking, understanding their place in the business, and most importantly, their potential impact on **the customer**. If they could observe the poor customer service operator being abused by an irate customer, because “the system” doesn’t allow access to key customer data for some reason, they are likely to understand the real requirements of the system they have commissioned.

WHAT TO DO?

The following are some suggestions of how to assist project managers become successful relationship managers:

- Use a “balanced scorecard” approach which looks for a broad range of qualities and values when recruiting and developing people. Realise that people do not end to be all-rounders – they have strengths that we need but these are often accompanied by weaknesses.
- Reward and recognise “people” skills in your performance evaluation system, promotion, remuneration and other forms of recognition.
- Invest time in allowing project managers to understand the challenges and issues across the organisation. For example, in areas such as operations, marketing, and customer service. Let them follow the flow of work through the organisation to understand why they are asked to do what they do.
- Foster and reward systemic thinking and customer focus (every decision of the business is made in the light of customer impact). Jerre Stead of Ingram Micro tells his people – “If you are in a meeting for 15 minutes and no one mentions the customer, ask why. If no one mentions the customer in 30 minutes, get up and walk out.”ⁱⁱ That is customer focus!
- Get people to actually value difference (this is more than mere lip service). Encourage them to explore how other people think, their ideas and what motivates them. What are their WIIFM’s?
- Cost-effective training. As someone with a strong training background, I will always advocate cost-effective training. I declare I do have a vested interest in training – it is a significant part of my business. However, I have always remembered a quote I heard many years ago, “If you think training’s expensive, try ignorance.”

TRAINING FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

So, what sort of training will benefit our project managers?

Obviously, they need to continually develop their areas of “technical” expertise and project management skills – they may specialise even further, or train to manage more and more complex projects, programs and portfolios. But, we probably do that for them already.

However, project managers need training in people skills to assist them with such activities as the following:

- Leading, developing and managing project teams (high performance teams don’t just happen)

- Evaluating / managing employee performance (system and practice)
- Coaching and counselling employees (the tough discussions)
- Leading and managing change (project managers need to be change agents)
- Facilitating group interactions (how else will you manage a project chartering session, chair a project committee meeting, get consensus from warring department heads, resolve issues between I.T. and key customers, etc.?)
- Influencing and managing stakeholders (getting funding or people resources, negotiating extent of scope change, gaining commitment and attendance, etc.)
- Presentation skills (verbal, written, audio-visual) to present a compelling business case, ensure your ideas are understood, address different learning styles, etc.

TRAINING FOR OTHERS

Of course, project managers are not the only people in organisations involved with projects, and these other people will benefit from additional training. Consider the following as illustrations:

- Does your sponsor really understand their role in “going in to bat” for you when you need resource, time, clarification, better specifications, specialist help, etc.?
- Do sponsor and executives understand that if they don’t attend a critical meeting and make that decision, then your critical path will be blown out of the water?
- Are they committed to staying up to date with latest reports, or do they bail you up in the corridor for an hour to grill you about a “hobby-horse” issue that was settled and reported at the latest meeting (which they missed)?
- Do they have at least a high-level understanding of the Project Process Framework operating at your place?
- Can they manage the competing resource requirements of their whole portfolio of concurrent programs and projects?

If not, then a concise course in Project Governance may be in order.

- Do project team members have a clear understanding of the Project Process Framework – the language, reports, tools, etc?
- Do they understand the project goals, where they fit in the picture, customer impact, impact of time, quality and cost issues?

A one-day “Project Management Awareness” course for participants in project teams may be warranted.

- Do the business analysts (so often the “meat in the sandwich”) know enough about both the customer’s needs and business, and process improvement approaches?

Provide some process improvement training focussed on customer requirements.

SUCCESS IS OPTIONAL

When we go into organisations, whether public or private, manufacturing or service, and ask, “Do you experience any problems with projects?” we are provided with an extensive list. These problems have a significant cost associated with them as they result in:

- wasted resources,
- dissatisfied customers,
- frustrated project teams, and
- a tarnished image.

To overcome them, an investment must be made to:

- implement an effective project management methodology,
- clarify project roles and responsibilities for **everyone** involved, and
- **skill** those involved.

Project management techniques makes sense; but they are not common sense. If they were, organisations would not be experiencing the problems with projects that they currently do.

Developing the project management capabilities of an organisation will improve its performance. However, improvement involves an investment. Organisation that do not make the investment may find out that “success is optional.” But, to capture a thought of Albert Einstein;

“Insanity. Expecting things to change, when you don’t change anything.”

PROJECT MANAGEMENT IS STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT IS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT,

PROJECT MANAGEMENT IS RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT.

Projects affect and involve PEOPLE, and project managers must be able to communicate effectively with people if they are to be effective in managing their projects and delivering the best time / cost / quality outcomes for their customers (people).

To quote Peter Block once more: “Even the most technical problem is managed by human beings, working in politically minded organisations.” We must equip our people to do that.

Project managers need:

- Skills to listen and communicate effectively, verbally, visually and in writing
- Understanding of others’ WIIFMs
- Understanding and managing expectations
- Interpreting and understanding perceptions – self and others.
- Confidence though training and practice

As mentioned earlier, project managers must be competent in the “foundation skills” of project management – they must understand lifecycles, scoping, planning, control techniques etc. But, to be successful, they must have skills that deal with the people dimensions of projects.

Invest in these skills; the return on investment is significant.

“Two plus two equals four until people get involved.”

Author unknown

ⁱ Block, Peter, (1981) *Flawless Consulting*, Pfeiffer & Company, San Francisco

ⁱⁱ Belasco, J.A. and Stead, J.L. (1999) *Soaring with the Phoenix* (video)