

Improve IT Project Success: Hire a Manager Who Is a Born Leader

Information Management Special Reports, July 7, 2009

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The project management approach is being used more and more by organizations implementing their IT investments. This has led to a widespread familiarity of the project management process, allowing the profession to mature and become much more of a strategic and integral part of business. In fact, an opinion that's fast becoming an industry standard is this: if you want your IT project to succeed, put a certified project management professional (PMP) in charge of it. This certification helps ensure that important managerial competencies – from integration to procurement – will be met.

This is a great place to start. But is it enough? On average, about 70 percent of all IT-related projects fail to meet their on-time, on-budget objectives or to produce the expected business results. In one KPMG survey, 67 percent of the companies who participated said that their program/project management function was in need of improvement. Why? A number of leading factors were cited, including unreasonable project timelines, poorly defined requirements, poor scope management and unclear project objectives. So if there's a proliferation of certified PMPs managing mission-critical IT projects, why is there still such an impressive failure rate attributed to the very same core competencies that PMPs are certified to address? The actual root cause for many of these common failure points may be a lack of leadership. That is, while the project manager may be focused on what needs to be done and may well know how to do it, he or she may not be acting as a project leader by motivating others and fighting for the project when the chips are down.

Why Leadership is Key

PMPs are cognizant of the processes, techniques and tools that should be used to manage projects and have documented project management experience. And while a PMP certification is important, it alone is not sufficient for successful project management. Let's compare it to another profession, such as teaching. It's important for a school teacher to have the certification and qualifications necessary to teach. But if that teacher lacks fundamental personality traits like the ability to lead, inspire and act compassionately, then he or she simply won't be an effective teacher, no matter how knowledgeable he or she is.

With many troubled IT projects, there appears to be a common link: leadership is missing in action. While certification is a good foundation for knowing what to do, it takes true leadership to drive complex projects to successful conclusions.

The PMI Body of Knowledge outlines general best practices for project managers. It specifies five process groups for project management: initiating, planning, executing, controlling and monitoring, and closing. These five areas are basic concepts and are consistent with the functions of management within an organization. Managers are responsible for planning, organizing, directing, resourcing, and controlling for the purpose of achieving organizational goals. What's more, the certified project manager should be able to demonstrate competent management of the nine PMI knowledge: project integration, scope, time, quality, cost, human resources, communications, risks and procurement.

However, the ability to manage each of these project areas still may not produce successful project outcomes. It can be true for both government and commercial organizations that project leadership, not just management, is the critical differentiator. Project management without project leadership is likely to result in project failure.

The intent here is not to redefine leadership. It's already been defined as the ability to affect human behavior to accomplish a mission or the act of influencing a people to set and achieve goals. Volumes of business and strategy texts have been written about this critical competency. Visit your local bookstore and you will see numerous titles identifying leadership styles, leadership characteristics and inspirational leadership topics. Some authors or practitioners have made the point that leadership and

management represent two different skill sets and that either an individual has the characteristics and skills necessary for leadership or those more appropriate for management. Others have suggested that leadership is knowing where to go and that management is about how to actually get there. I find this dichotomy troubling and perhaps at the heart of our IT project management failure rate. Instead, I believe that not only can project managers act as leaders, but, in fact, they must provide leadership if projects are to achieve results.

Achieving Project Leadership

Project leadership is all about shaping a team of diverse individuals (employers and contractors, some from different organizations) into a force that produces measureable project results. At a basic level, project managers must be able to set the vision, define success and determine the measurements of success. Then they must inspire, persuade and lead the project team. These characteristics aren't necessarily acquired through certification. And, it's up to those staffing the project to be able to recognize these qualities in prospective candidates as the edge needed to take the project to its goal.

For project managers to become project leaders, they should demonstrate competence in three essential skill areas. Successful project leadership involves:

- Leading courageously,
- Influencing others and
- Acting with resilience.

Leading courageously is a critical competency. Large, mission-critical IT projects have a huge resource pool – including contractors and vendors – representing different organizations and job roles. These resources may view their tasks slightly differently and may not all be aligned with project goals. Furthermore, the sheer number of issues and risks may make it difficult to focus on those tasks that are most critical. In this kind of environment, leading courageously can easily make the difference between success and failure. Leading courageously means clarifying what is important and taking a stand to resolve important issues. It also requires driving hard on the right issues and confronting problems promptly. Finally, courageous project leadership means being decisive and challenging others to make tough choices.

Influencing others is an essential competency for most projects, but especially for those with large project teams, numerous stakeholders and different user communities. Influencing others means giving compelling reasons for ideas and suggestions and winning support from others, both within the project team and in the user and stakeholder community. It also requires the ability to negotiate persuasively and get others to take action. Finally, it means influencing the decisions of upper management, whether within your own organization or the client organization.

Acting with resilience is critical to project leadership and is especially important when projects are at critical stages or are in trouble. When a project manager acts with resilience, he or she keeps the focus on project goals and refuses to give up. Sometimes it means being tough enough, in the face of adversity, to fight the good fight and get agreement on issues that threaten to derail the project. Or it may simply require being flexible enough to negotiate solutions that keep driving for the goal of project success, when others might give up and accept defeat.

So while project management is a basic need, knowing what to do and being able to manage the nine knowledge areas identified by PMI is not enough on complex projects. Project leadership can be the differentiating factor in project success, especially on large, mission-critical projects.

Successful project managers must lead courageously and be able to influence others to resolve some of the most critical problems that projects experience. To paraphrase Churchill, they must never, ever give up; they must act with resilience even in the face of conflict and problems. To experience the project success that investments demand, assign project managers who can act as project leaders to your mission-critical IT projects.

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8/3/2009

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