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Improving Project Success Rates with Better Leadership

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Introduction

Factual and anecdotal evidence confirms that IT investments are inherently risky. On average, about 70% of all IT related projects fail to meet their on-time, on-budget objectives to produce the expected business results. In one KPMG survey, 67% of the companies who participated said that their program/project management function was in need of improvement. Why? A number of leading factors for project failure were suggested by the survey, including the “usual suspects”: unreasonable project timelines, poorly defined requirements, poor scope management, and unclear project objectives. Granted, all of these factors can play a role in project success. But are they the cause or project failure, or just a symptom of some larger issue? In this article, we will discuss that the root cause for many of these common failure points is really the ability to *lead* projects, not just manage them.

Leadership: Missing in Action

One would think that the proliferation of certified PMPs would have increased IT project success rates. However, given the research previously cited, this does not appear to be the case. Certainly, PMPs are cognizant of the processes, techniques and tools that should be used to manage projects and have documented project management experience. We contend that certification—the PMP—is indeed important, but that it alone is not sufficient for successful project management. Having been called on to rescue and turnaround numerous IT projects, we have had the opportunity to analyze why a project gets in trouble. As we looked at several of these troubled projects we realized that there appears to be a common link: leadership is missing in action. 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*. 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* specifies five process groups for project management: Initiating, Planning, Executing, Controlling and Monitoring, and Closing. These five areas 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. The certified project manager should be able to demonstrate competent management of the nine PMI knowledge areas: 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. Our experience on client sites for both government and commercial clients reveals that project leadership, not just management, is the critical differentiator. Project *management* without project *leadership* is likely to result in project failure.

Certainly, it is not our intent 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. Check out your local book store 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 all about how to actually get there. We find this dichotomy troubling and perhaps at the heart of our IT project management failure rate. Instead, we believe that not only *can* project managers act as leaders, but in fact that they must provide leadership if projects are to achieve results.

A Closer Look at 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 our company, we recruit and develop project managers who can provide the leadership that complex IT projects require. 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.

We argue that for project managers to become project leaders, they must demonstrate competence in three essential skill areas. Successful project leadership involves:

- Leading courageously
- Influencing others
- Acting with resilience

Leading courageously is a critical competency because large IT projects have a huge resource pool representing different organizations and job roles. These resources may see 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 zero in 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 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.

Summing It Up

In this article we've presented the case that project leadership is the differentiating factor in project success, especially on large, mission-critical projects. Knowing what to do and being able to manage the nine knowledge areas identified by PMI is not enough on complex projects.

Successful project managers *must* lead courageously and be able to influence others to resolve some of the most critical problems that projects experience. And 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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