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Three Points – About Project Management Education, Training & Career Development
or
Three Good Reasons for Continuous Learning in Project Management

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Introduction

I have recently been involved in providing some project management courses to a major US government agency, consisting of a short course on basic project management and a short course to prepare participants for project management certification. While preparing to welcome participants and introduce the topics of the classes, it occurred to me that those attending might need some perspective on not only what they would be learning, but what they would not learn. I also realized that another important message was the importance of continuous learning in the project management field, since it is unlikely that any one person has all the answers related to managing every program and project these days.

In that class in Washington, DC, I mentioned three important aspects of the learning process related to project management. I have expanded on those three points; here they are along with some of my thoughts on the issues.

Point 1 – Project Management is more than meets the eye.

Over the last 50 years, modern project management has grown, expanded and matured. As the types, sizes and range of projects and programs have increased, across all industries and organizational types, so have project management models, methods and techniques grown and expanded.

Project Management is no longer focused solely on planning and managing scope, quality, time and cost. It involves all aspects of organizing, leading and managing teams of often diverse professionals and technical personnel in order to create or achieve difficult and complex activities. The debate over whether project management is art or science is over – or it should be. Project management clearly involves both the disciplined application of proven techniques and tools, as well as the creative and responsive application of team leadership and resource management skills. Project management requires knowledge, education, experience and maturity – in both technical and human terms.

In addition, as project management has been applied on thousands of different projects around the world, under differing economic, political, geographic, cultural and environmental conditions, a wide variety of application models and lessons learned have emerged. A good example is in the information systems industry where every new system tends to involve some new technology infrastructure, software, stakeholders, business drivers, organizational participants (team members), regulatory or governmental requirements, or project team capabilities. The robust global projects environment and areas of application have given rise to a vast global project management body of knowledge and, especially, body of project management experiences.

Implications: It is impossible to learn all project management concepts, models, applications or approaches (in other words, all project management knowledge) in a single class, course or even university program. There will always be more to learn, about project management and various specialized aspects of it.

For example, the subject of project risk management has grown into a professional field in its own right. There are many books, courses, consultants and organizations focused on this aspect of managing programs and projects. In the defense and security industries, this field is well developed. In large organizations and in selected industries such as construction and energy, project risk management is quite mature – much less so in small and medium sized enterprises.

Message: Project management cannot be learned overnight. While many concepts can be taught and learned, project management for complex projects and programs requires a longer process of acquiring knowledge, experience and understanding. Mature project management requires continuous learning.

Point 2 – Experience is not enough!

Project management competence requires experience – direct experience working on project teams and actually managing projects. Most project management related careers involve a series of positions with increasing responsibilities on actual projects.

For example, a recent university graduate might start working on a project in a technical or support role, as part of a project team. After one or more years, he or she might be assigned a leadership role on the project team, or over a small project if project management training has been provided. After 5-10 years, someone might be entrusted to manage a small or medium sized project. In most cases, it is only after 10-15 years that someone will be assigned full responsibility for a large or mission-critical project. And it is generally only after managing several projects that one is designated a program manager.

If one assumes that most small and medium sized projects last from 6 to 18 months, and large projects have a duration of 2 to 5 years (or longer), then over a 30 year career one will most likely only work on an average of 10-20 projects, maximum. The number of projects on which one works, of course, can increase for several reasons. For example, a mechanical engineer or information systems graduate might provide design or technical services on dozens of projects – as engineer, programmer or systems analyst. But that same engineer or IT professional might only fill a broad project management role on far fewer projects.

Others might gain a lot of project management knowledge and experience while working as a consultant, on a wide variety of programs and projects. Those individuals are not generally responsible for managing large or complex projects, however, and, if they are, it will only be on a very few projects. In other words, it is impossible to gain direct experience on very many projects or in very many different industries or environments.

Implications: One cannot possibly learn everything about managing complex programs and projects from experience alone. In order to learn more, project managers must read about project management, take courses and learn from others. Networking and participating in professional networks can be extremely useful in that regard. Many organizations and executives now understand this, and support the cost of additional education and networking activities for project management staff.

Most project managers and project management professionals also learn this very quickly. They simply recognize that they do not always have all of the answers, do not yet know every project management technique, application or lessons learned elsewhere in their industry or related to the size or type of project he or she might be managing. This is still true for me, after 35 years of project management related experience. It becomes more true as new ideas, theories, models and solutions (and research results) are published in journals or presented in conferences every year.

Message – Continuous education and learning are absolutely necessary for all project managers and PM professionals, if they are to become more knowledgeable and more competent. Experience is no longer enough!

Point 3 – Everyone is a Project Stakeholder today.

Such concepts as Strategic Project Management, Portfolio Project Management, Enterprise Project Management and the Project Management Office have gained a lot of momentum and popularity in recent years, for two primary reasons: (1) more organizations, both public and private, are initiating programs and projects to achieve their goals; and (2) more projects, and the higher visibility of many of those projects and programs, require more and better project management.

Obviously, those working on projects, and executives and customers who sponsor or purchase projects or project results, understand that they are project stakeholders. It is less obvious how projects affect many others, and how many other stakeholders there may be, both internal and external to the project organizations themselves.

For example, if a project-based organization aligns its programs and projects with strategic objectives (or the organization's mission) according to Project Portfolio Management principles, then every project should clearly be important to the organization. This is, of course, even more true of "mission-critical" projects or large projects for important customers. It can therefore be easily argued that all executives, employees and shareholders (stakeholders of the organization itself) should care about the success or failure of those projects. In other words, all employees and shareholders of the organization become stakeholders for EVERY project in the organization.

Extending this logic to public or government (taxpayer funded) projects leads to an even more interesting conclusion. If a project is financed with government or public money, then the taxpayers and public users become customers (significant stakeholders) of those projects and programs.

Implications for project managers and organizations: As the number and range of project stakeholders increase, then project stakeholder management issues increase in both importance and complexity. This is not only true today but will continue to increase in the future as the number of stakeholders continues to grow. This suggests that project managers may need additional knowledge and training to deal with stakeholder issues – communications, relationships, risks, etc. As stakeholders gain more knowledge about projects and project management, the pressures on project managers will only increase.

Implications for Stakeholders. For project stakeholders, either within companies or public citizens, the need and demand for more knowledge about the projects they care about, and about project management, should increase. Why wouldn't stakeholders want to know how their money is being spent, or wasted? Why wouldn't stakeholders want to know about the major risks for a project, and how those risks will be managed? If a project is "mission-critical" for an organization, why wouldn't all employees, want to know the status of the project or whether the organization is at risk if the project fails?

Why wouldn't public users of a highway, school or hospital want to know about the major milestones for the project, completion dates, costs, status, project manager's experience level and qualifications, and much other information? Project stakeholders need and want more information about the projects and programs they care about. They are only now beginning to demand more accountability and transparency from public officials and corporate executives

In my opinion, the only reason these issues have not become a bigger problem for many project managers and organizations (and the project management profession) is that the general public has not yet learned enough about project management to ask the right questions. But that will change!

Message: Project managers need more knowledge and education related to project stakeholders. Everyone, including non-project employees and the general public, need more information and education about projects and project management. The demand for project management knowledge will increase.

Conclusion

Effective management of projects and programs is becoming more important to more organizations, as they embrace and use projects and programs to accomplish their goals, both in private industry and in the public sector. Many of those programs and projects are highly visible, with many stakeholders. As the number of projects has grown, so have the number, range and nature of project stakeholders. Many of those stakeholders need or want more information about both the projects they care about and how those projects are managed.

Project managers, and the project management profession, cannot just rely on experience; additional education and knowledge are needed for a variety of reasons. One cannot learn everything from working on only a few projects, or from a single class, course or degree program. Learning from others is also needed.

Continuous learning is critical for project management success, for both performance and one's career! Take this into consideration when planning or conducting your next project management class, or your career.

And finally, because so many more people are stakeholders, on one or more projects that are important to them, the demand for project management education, information and knowledge will only increase. ***Everyone needs to know more about project management!***

If you have a comment, question or reaction to this article, please let me know.

Good luck with your projects!

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