

Project Management : Still More Art than Science

by Kate Belzer

The Key to Project Management Success

Change is here to stay. Organizations are changing at a breakneck pace in order to satisfy their customers and stay competitive. It is in this environment that project managers must learn to thrive, delivering products and services that meet the needs of the organization and assist businesses in delivering value to their customers. It is not surprising that project management has become a profession in its own right. Project managers who can be successful in this environment are sought after. The question that everyone is asking is, "What makes a project manager successful?"

Before that question can be answered, a more important question is, "What makes a project successful?" Some would define a successful project simply as satisfying the client's requirements within schedule and budget limitations and without burning out the project team. But the focus should be on adding value to the business. Therefore, simply meeting requirements does not define project success. Delivering business value does.

So how does a project manager deliver business value? Project management is art as well as science. Understanding processes, tools, and techniques (the hard skills, the science of project management)—and knowing when and how to apply them—is only part of the answer. A greater piece of the puzzle for successful project delivery is soft skills (the art of project management)—the timeless principles of working within an organization. Soft skills help to define the business value, clarify the vision, determine requirements, provide direction, build teams, resolve issues, and mitigate risk. Without the appropriate soft skills, the likelihood of project success diminishes.

Know When and How to Use Hard Skills

Project managers must have the appropriate processes, tools, and techniques at their fingertips to deliver projects. A key resource to many project managers today is the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), which provides the manager with generally accepted processes, tools, and techniques of project management. It groups the processes into nine knowledge areas, detailing what is required by the process (the inputs), what occurs during the process, and the deliverables of the process (the outputs). This document merely provides the project manager with a guide; the appropriate implementation of these processes, tools, and techniques on a

given project is another challenge. Understanding the best way to do this comes with experience.

Of course, there are many other project management practices available in today's market. For example, the Unified Software Development Process outlines a process that is use-case driven, architecture-centric, iterative, and incremental. It requires a different approach to project management in order to be successful while still using some of the PMBOK practices. The same holds true for Critical Chain Project Management. While this form of managing projects has a different focus than the Critical Path--the Critical Chain--it does not replace all of the processes and tools of the PMBOK.

It is true that the hard skills associated with these project management practices can be learned from a textbook and can be further developed through experience. But if a project manager focuses on these practices and skimps on the broader soft skills, success will be elusive. Consider the following scenarios:

- Managing scope without being able to clearly communicate its meaning can cause unclear deliverables and requirements and a dissatisfied client.
- Managing communications without the ability to develop an open and honest exchange of ideas within the project team can result in issues not being raised until they reach a critical point.
- Developing a project plan without engaging the team appropriately can lead team members to ignore the plan and create mistrust within the team.
- Making use of all these processes and procedures without displaying leadership in delivering the end product or service will result in failure.

Even with a mastery of hard skills and a keen sense of when to use them, a project will rarely be completely successful without the appropriate application of soft skills.

The Missing Link - Soft Skills

A clear understanding of the soft skills of project management and the ability to apply these skills effectively throughout the life cycle of a project will enhance the success of a project exponentially. Few projects fail because the Gantt chart/PERT/CPM are wrong, the roles/responsibilities are not mapped out in a matrix, or the cost charts were off. More often they fail because of a project manager's inability to communicate effectively, work within the organization's culture, motivate the project team, manage stakeholder expectations, understand the business objectives, solve problems effectively, and make clear and knowledgeable decisions. These are the skills that take time to acquire through experience, coaching, and mentoring. The following soft skills are crucial for successful project management:

Communication - This is, quite simply, the most important soft skill for all

project managers. They must have the ability to convey complex ideas easily, clearly articulate what must be accomplished, keep the team moving toward a common goal, foster an environment that allows team members to communicate openly and honestly, admit their own mistakes without losing respect, negotiate, listen, facilitate the list goes on.

Organizational Effectiveness - Project managers must understand the corporate culture, the organizational dynamics, and the individuals they are dealing with. With this understanding, they will be able to obtain resources more effectively, gain support, and build a stronger foundation for the effort.

Leadership - Project Managers must lead. They frequently do not have direct authority, yet they do have direct responsibility. They must build authority through appropriate leadership.

Problem Solving and Decision-Making - Resolving issues or solving problems is a large portion of what a project manager does every day. Each phase of a project has its own unique set of problems. Without strong problem-solving skills, the sheer volume of issues that are a normal part of every project will soon overwhelm the project manager.

Team Building - Building a team in the business environment is a challenge. Co-location is not easy and rarely occurs. More frequently a project team is made up of borrowed resources from other functional areas within the organization and usually also has vendors and suppliers. Creating a team atmosphere where the team believes that "we are all in this together" is a critical component to project success.

Flexibility and Creativity - Having a proven framework to guide a project manager is not enough. The project manager must also adapt to the needs of the project. Since every project is unique, each may require different components, templates, tools, and techniques. Using the "project manager toolbox" effectively will assist in delivering a successful project.

Trustworthiness - The project manager must have the trust of all of the stakeholders involved in the project. Simply meeting deadlines is just one facet of this; a project manager must also be able to convey that he can be trusted day-to-day to do what is right at the right time to keep the project successful and the client satisfied.

The list above is not all-inclusive. Time management, stress management, customer relationship management, expectation management, coaching, mentoring, and sound business judgment are other soft skills that a project manager needs to be successful.

Keep the Big Picture in Mind

Of course, a project manager operates within the context of the enterprise itself,

and so a full understanding of the organization and how it works is essential. The figure below represents the “big picture” of the enterprise, the system in which daily activity takes place. The outer ring represents the unwritten and written rules by which the organization operates. The middle ring is where the leadership of the organization puts into practice these rules of operation. The core is where project management and other capabilities within the organization are developed and supported.

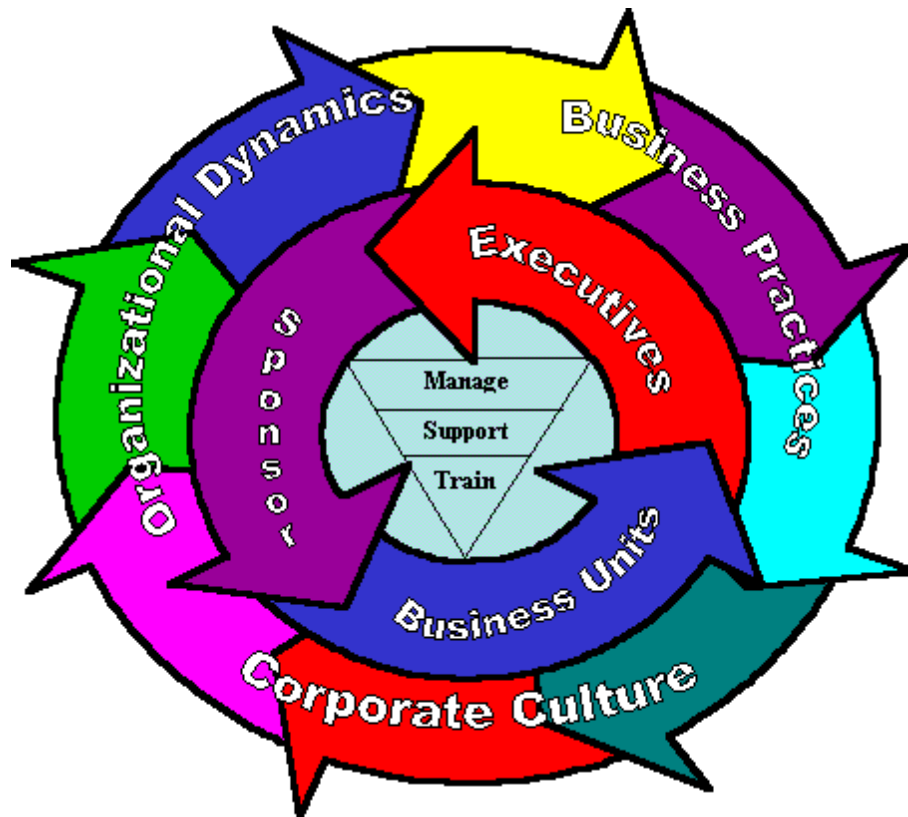


Figure 1: This picture represents a holistic view of the organization. The project manager must be able to work at all three levels or rings. The outer ring represents the corporate view where the organization forms its strategy and determines policies and procedures, the middle ring represents where the corporate view is put into practice through tactical plans and initiatives, and the inner circle is where the actual work gets done: where project management takes place.

The Outer Ring: Written and Unwritten Rules

When undertaking a project, it is necessary to understand both the business's corporate culture (behavior patterns and beliefs) and its organizational dynamics (an interactive system, especially one involving competing or conflicting forces). A project manager must work within these unwritten guidelines to be successful. An understanding of culture and organizational dynamics will dictate whom to work with, how to work with them, and why—not to mention more superficial but

still important issues such as appropriate dress and work schedule. It is also clear that both culture and organizational dynamics change over time. These changes come about through the restructuring, downsizing, or flattening of the organization itself or by changes in key players (the sponsor or support staff of the project), all of which could impact a project. These two portions of the outer ring, corporate culture and organizational dynamics, influence the business practices within the enterprise.

Understanding business practices, the written guidelines, is the third key element of this outer ring. Each business unit within an organization may run projects differently. In some cases, business practices might be nonexistent, the participants expecting magic to deliver successful projects; in other situations, a clearly defined project management methodology might already be in place. If a project manager is not prepared to deal with this diversity and insists on sticking to a given method, no matter how strong the method is, the project could suffer. If a client, sponsor, user, or project team is expecting some information in a particular format and receives it in a different, less familiar form, confusion will likely result.

When an organization has no defined business practice around project delivery, the project manager is not only challenged with managing the project effort, but must also educate the various stakeholders in their roles and responsibilities of project management. This is a tall order and can be a roadblock to success. Skillful and constant communication with all involved is critical. The project manager may use processes, tools, and techniques that they know are successful—but must remain flexible.

The Inner Ring: Building Relationships with Executives/Sponsors/Business Units

One would think that with the many volumes written about project management, executives, sponsors, and business units involved in a project would understand their roles and responsibilities. But instead there is often a gap between what is required from these audiences and what actually occurs. Working within the organization to educate these groups of people is a key responsibility of the project manager. It is essential to guide the sponsor in building the relationships necessary for project success and to identify key individuals and groups within the organization that must be appropriately engaged. Without these relationships, a project can become mired in political bogs; it can be difficult to have changes approved and get sign-off on key phases, slowing the progress of a project to a crawl. On the other hand, strong relationships can help a project move forward. Building these relationships before the project gets started will ensure appropriate involvement, maintaining these relationships during the project will ensure successful implementation, and closing out the project on good terms with all involved will ensure that future efforts will have a greater likelihood of success. Communication and organizational effectiveness are

critical skills to apply at this inner ring, where the support for the project at the organizational level exists.

The Core - Continued Success Requires Continual Renewal

The core of the organization is where project managers actually manage the work that produces the end product or service for which the project was chartered in the first place. This is the nuts-and-bolts of project management, where the hard skills come into play. This is also where you will find the actual management and support of the project itself, including any training required for team members.

The project manager who believes she has all of the answers is doomed to fail. When someone believes he has seen it all, he no longer learns and grows as an individual. When project managers get stuck in this place, they will most assuredly begin to fail. Understanding the natural laws of growth and development makes for successful project managers. The continued development of both the art and the science of project management will serve to strengthen the individual project manager. The organization itself must support the continued development of individuals within the organization to sustain their ability to provide themselves with skilled individuals in the art and science of project management.

Business is Complex - Grow With It

Today's work environment is inherently complex, constantly changing, and focused on customer satisfaction. This environment is challenging the capabilities of project managers. Delivering business value on time, within budget, and to the customers' satisfaction is both science and art. Today's project manager must be able to apply the processes, tools, and techniques of the trade efficiently and effectively to be successful. However, without mastering the timeless soft skills to supplement the hard skills, few project managers will succeed. This combination of art and science, while taking into consideration the broader organizational context, will lead to successful projects.