

# PROJECT MANAGER SUCCESS CRITERIA

By Robert Youker

The thesis of this article is that there is overwhelming evidence that the PMI® and other certification systems and project management bodies of knowledge do **not** measure the most important factors for success in managing projects. To prove this point I will summarize research by Professor Owen Gadeken of Defense Systems Management College at Fort Belvoir, Virginia and Professor John Kotter of the Harvard Business School.

Owen Gadeken has conducted more than five research studies over the last dozen years to identify what are the most important competencies for a project manager to have success. All of the studies utilized the critical incident method of research and follow-up surveys where outstanding Project Managers are interviewed to identify what they do that makes them so effective. (for details on the approach and results see: Gadeken , Owen, *What the Defense Systems Management College Has Learned From Ten Years of Project Leadership Research*, Proceedings of PMI Research Conference 2000 p 274 – 256) The research resulted in defining the following eight behaviors of the best project managers:

1. *Are strongly committed to a clear mission*
2. **Have a long term and big picture perspective**
3. **Are both systematic and innovative thinkers**
4. **Find and empower the best people for their teams**
5. **Are selective in their involvement in project issues**
6. **Focus on external stakeholders**
7. *Thrive on relationships and influence*
8. **Proactively gather information and insist on results**

Note: Italicized competencies differentiate top performers.

I think it is obvious that the PMI® certification test cannot measure a prospective Project Managers competency in these 8 categories. It is also clear that the PMI® PMBOK® only covers perhaps half of these factors but without the necessary emphasis for a Project Manager to know where he/she should concentrate their effort.

Dr. Gadeken summarizes his studies as follows: “However, an emerging view of the project management profession is that while technical and managerial expertise are important, the primary role of project managers is to provide the leadership focus on their projects.” Owen concludes that this implies, “This includes carefully structuring

processes for selection, assessment and development of project managers ...” The required behavioral skills in gaining influence and getting groups to commit to objectives are difficult to assess and innovative approaches are required.

Professor John P. Kotter of the Harvard Business School published an article entitled, *What effective general managers really do*, in the November-December 1982 Harvard Business Review. This was a follow-up to similar research by others including Henry Mintzberg in his book and article, *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Harper & Row(1973). The conclusion of all of this research was to quote Kotter: “A rather large gap exists between the conventional wisdom on management functions, tools and systems on the one hand and actual managerial behavior on the other. The former is usually discussed in terms of planning, controlling, staffing, organizing, and directing -”. Does this sound like the PMI® PMBOK®? The study focused on a group of successful general managers and consisted of interviews, questionnaires and observations. These various studies all found that actual managerial behavior did not consist of Planning etc. but was much less programmed. Project managers are in effect mini-general managers so the results of Kotter’s and the others research are relevant for Project Managers also. In fact the project manager track is an excellent way for organizations to develop future general managers who gain a view of many different functions of a business in contrast to someone who has grown up in just one function.

Kotter found effective GMs concentrated their effort on three behaviors as follows:

- 1. Agenda setting**
- 2. Network building**
- 3. Execution: getting networks to implement agendas.**

Kotter defines the dilemma facing a new general manager in terms that sound exactly like the challenges facing a new Project Manager.

1. “Figuring out what to do despite uncertainty, great diversity, and an enormous amount of potentially relevant information.
2. Getting things done through a large and diverse set of people despite having little control over most of them”.

Effective general managers develop agendas for what they want to accomplish consisting of “loosely connected goals and plans that address their long, medium and short term responsibilities”. They do this with informal discussions with a very wide range of people, especially by asking questions.

Kotter also found that effective executives, “allocate significant time and effort when they first take their jobs to developing a network of cooperative relationships among those people they feel are needed to satisfy their emerging agendas – including outsiders”. Does this not sound like a Project Managers job? Does the PMI® certification process measure

this? “They try to create the appropriate “environment” (norms and values) they feel is necessary to implement their agenda”.

Then comes execution. “After they have developed their networks and agendas, effective GMs tend to shift their attention toward using the networks to implement their agendas. They marshal their interpersonal skills, budgetary resources, and information to influence people and events in a variety of direct and indirect ways.” Does this again not seem to describe the Project Managers job? Does the PMI® PMBOK® discuss this in a way that a potential project manager could learn how to actually perform these behaviors in a real situation? “Excellent performers ask, encourage, cajole, praise, reward, demand, manipulate, and generally motivate others with great skill in face-to-face situations.” Are these behaviors measured in the PMI® certification process?

Kotter draws several conclusions that are relevant to the project management situation today.

1. “Management training courses probably overemphasize formal tools, unambiguous problems and situations that deal simplistically with human relationships.
2. Another example of inappropriate courses is those that emphasize formal quantitative tools.
3. The formal planning systems within which many GMs must operate probably hinder effective performance.”

For a conclusion I will quote from an article by Kate Belzer, Project Management: Still More Art than Science, CNIDR Isearch. “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.**”

*I think it is clear that behavioral skills are most important and that they can not be learned by reading a guide nor measured by a simple certification process based on a test. Instead sophisticated methods of assessment, selection and coaching are required to insure that potential project managers have the requisite behavioral skills.*