

What Do You Do Around Here?

Defining the Roles and Relationships in the Project Life Cycle
by Rob Zanfardino

There is an amusing joke that is circulating around the water cooler these days and it goes something like this:

A tourist walked into a pet shop and was looking at the animals on display. While he was there, another customer walked in and said to the shopkeeper, "I'll have a C monkey please." The shopkeeper nodded, went over to a cage at the side of the shop and took out a monkey. He fit a collar and leash, handed it to the customer, saying, "That'll be \$5,000." The customer paid and walked out with his monkey. The tourist went over to the shopkeeper and said, "That is a very expensive monkey. Why did it cost so much?" The shopkeeper answered, "Ah, that monkey can program in C - very fast, tight code, no bugs, well worth the money." The tourist looked at the monkey in another cage. "That one's even more expensive! \$10,000! What does it do?" "Oh, that one's a C++ monkey; it can manage object-oriented programming, Visual C++, even some Java. All the really useful stuff," said the shopkeeper. The tourist looked around for a little longer and saw a third monkey in a cage of its own. The price tag around its neck read \$50,000. He gasped to the shopkeeper, "That one costs more than all the other put together! What on earth does it do?" The shopkeeper replied, "Well, I haven't actually seen it do anything but, the other monkeys call him the project manager."

I love a good joke and I truly feel the moment that we start taking ourselves too seriously or all important in our professional and personal lives we are in trouble. However, this joke has real meaning to me and perhaps to anyone else that had to manage a project of one type or another, who may have had the same feeling. It is an interesting way to start this article but in many respects this question, "What do you do around here?", is one of the most important ones that we need to be asking ourselves time and time again throughout the project cycle.

First let me explain why I am leading off with that theme. In all truth this type of question was posed to me by a developer in a company that I was working for some time ago. The development manager very early on in our relationship turned to me and asked "What do you do around here?" At first the question took me off guard and to be honest I was somewhat miffed that another team member

would even ask me that question, especially since I was the project manager and well heck everyone should know what we do from the get go. I found myself thinking about that question and its implications more and more over the years and I have come to realize that it is more important than I first gave it credit for.

Some time later while interviewing for another position I was asked what was my philosophy regarding project management. For those of you who have been subject to interviews and the absurd questions that you may have been asked, at last a meaty question for me to show what I am made of. At least this question would draw more on my skills and knowledge base and less on the bill rate.

Getting back to the question, "What do you do around here?", forced me to really think exactly what is the purpose and value add a project manager can provide in this matrix dominated work organization / project structure that uses borrowed resources to complete projects. After some time and with much thought I realized that "I" the project manager in many ways is very similar to the quarterback position on a football team in the United States. I like to explore this in further detail.

First look at the roles that the quarterback plays. He / she above all is the chief strategist and visionary of the plays on the field. Most important they must believe the game plan goals are achievable and he / she can do it with the existing team. Project Managers neither are the most technical or the best athlete nor should they be. They need to be the visionary in the group who believes that this project can succeed. Project Managers need to be the cohesive factor that can mold the team made up of many skills and personalities and get the team headed in the right direction. I like to draw the analogy that a very good project manager should be the glue that allows all the pieces of the project fit together. A lot of the times they are that intangible substance that is going on behind the scenes that may not always have form or shape but you know when it is missing. They also have to continually ask, and have answers ready for the three most important questions they face daily: "What do you do?", "Why do you do it?", and "Does the customer really care?"

In fact, if you look at all the team members on a project it is very much like that of the players of a football team. The quarterback being the project manager who is not the best runner or tight end but he / she needs to be the one who knows what everyone should be doing, when they should be doing it, and where they should all be at the end of the down or if you prefer milestone. The quarterback / project manager / needs to understand that the managers / coaches on the sideline are the key stakeholders each requiring that their requirements need to be met. The owner of the team / project is the project sponsor since they put the money up to start the play the game / project. Most importantly, the fans in the stand are the

end customers since they are buying this product or services, and at the very least they want this to work by winning / succeeding.

If you look at this further the quarterback never finishes the game with his original team. Due to injuries that occur or the momentum of the game the quarterback learns to adopt and adjust to the environment and the players on the field. When gathering his team in a huddle to discuss the next series of downs he needs to be asking those questions from his team members that provides him with the conditions of the field and of the opposing players. The quarterback needs to process this information and make adjustments to the game plan moment by moment. The quarterback is the one who is ultimately responsible for reading the linebacker and the backfield and calling a variance at the line of scrimmage. They need to assess the risks of each action the team is making and have a backup plan in case it goes wrong.

There is little difference between the quarterback and the project manager. He or she must understand that changes will occur all throughout the game / project lifecycle. Some may be called by the coaches / stakeholders in the middle of the game, many should be called by the quarterback / project manager at the line of scrimmage adjusting to the flow of the game / project. The importance of the quarterback / project manager in this situation is that they need to know which changes must occur in order to win and which one are just fluff that adds no value to the game / project. In fact, it is critical that the quarterback / project manager establish themselves as the "Go To" person, the one who is ultimately responsible for the actions that take place on the field / project. Quarterbacks / Project Managers do that by being successful. An IBM manager of mine once told me if you are good, the cream always comes to the top. You distinguish yourself by your actions and your accomplishments on the field or at the end of the project. For the project manager complete your projects on time and on budget, and be known for your integrity. In this day and age of corporate scandals, the focus on business and moral integrity by the project manager is increasing.

However there is much more to a project manager than that. A project manager especially those at the senior level are asked to participate more and more in the sales cycle, and for good reasons. I have had numerous customers confide in me that those of us who represent the project side provide a level of security to the customer that the account manager cannot. If you refer to my article [The Black Pen Concept](#) (published in May /June 2005 edition of the PM Forum, Featured Papers Section) about understanding relationships you will understand the account manager's sole responsibility is to get new clients and new work, or new work out of existing clients and they do a very good job and help the process tremendously. But in many respects they do not understand what the project

manager does or what the project team can deliver and when. Senior Project Managers have been asked to take on these added responsibilities to help initiate and support the sale process. In fact this has become an essential part of the project right down to the technical folks, unfortunately the project teams are not provided the skills in which to support the account teams. How do you expect a developer or architect to assist in the sales process when they have usually been two steps away from the customer and for many are most comfortable staying away from the customer?

The role of the project manager is changing. No one knows better than the project manager that it is not a touch down if you fumble on the one inch line even though you traveled 99 yards down the field. If the time runs out and you are on the one inch line you have not completed the project on time and on budget, the game is over. Overtime periods on a project cost both time and money and there are no winners.

So how do you solve this dilemma? The answer is to develop the skills that it takes to enhance the project process. Writing, public speaking, and brushing up on relationship building are great skills to start enhancing. This is not so far fetch a notion considering that more and more of the project team members are from outsource countries. Many of them now having to outsource their work to additional countries like China and Russia in order to meet profit margins.

This is a point that needs to be discussed. We live in a technology based world. Heck our livelihood depends on it. However we are letting the essence of what we are as human beings slip away by not promoting with every opportunity the personal relationships that are essential to increasing business. Such terms as "On Demand", "Instant Messaging", etc., are changing our cultures in ways that we cannot fully understand. Our technology based cultures have dramatically decreased our abilities to negotiate points of differences that were once able to be resolved over a meal at lunch. I have watched with much dismay the inabilities in the next generation of work force recruits who have spent hours and days in front of the TV, X-Box games and even computers, reacting between themselves in very short and curt responses when they cannot get instant gratifications on their task. In fact, as a parent I have seen the next generation losing one of the most important skills that we have developed as humans since climbing down the tree and banding together to form tribes, simply put - the art of understanding and being able to conduct negotiations which is ever more crucial as we lose our abilities to develop intimate business relationships.

So, getting back to the original premise of this article, what do project managers do? We build relationships by completing projects on time, on budget and to the specifications of the customers. Due to this matrix system we have much more

on our plates. We have to build those professional skills in our team members that are not being developed: Integrity, Professionalism, Empathy, and Sincerity. In short, a code of business conduct and ethics that creates an environment for project managers to make mistakes and grow this profession of ours. In a world that is shrinking at an ever faster rate the right to make mistakes in the learning curve is eluding us at an ever faster pace. Without mistakes there can be no learning or improvement.

As a Senior Project / Program Manager one of my major responsibilities is to identify and mentor other project managers. It amazes me that the new generations of project managers have the technical skills but are lacking the human ones. Effective communications be it written or oral is going by the wayside. In many instances I have to play the role of English teacher correcting grammar, etc., on weekly projects reports or Statement of Works prior to being sent to the customer. Many times the ability to develop effective business relationships are very poor at best. Those of us in this profession must take it upon ourselves to ensure that not only the project methodologies are developed but the business ones also.

So the question, "What do you do around here?", in many respects is an important question simply because in this day and age we are all asked to do a lot more than we might have had to do. In fact this is a very good question that all of us should be asking ourselves. Going back to an earlier comment, as I have instructed corporations developing business reengineering models one needs to be able to ask and answer three basic questions: What do you do?, Why do you do it?, and Does the customer really care? If you ponder the implications to these questions it forces all of us to streamline our products and services to deliver the best for less.

A business environment must also exist that allows individuals to grow and take risks. Without risks or if an environment does not exist to foster personal growth, new ideas will be hampered. A project manager or a corporation even in a matrix model must create an environment so individuals feel confident to put their badges on the line each day and try new things without fear of job security. Managers must foster an environment so individuals challenge themselves in order to grow their skills and foster new ideas for the company. This is a mandate that must come from management in a top-down approach.

The days of just focusing on the next quarter's profits is becoming an attitude of the past. With the declining skilled workforce in the United States and what appears to be the failure of outsourcing to develop and retain employees as long term assets, corporations must now develop a long term strategy on the development of the future work force. Most corporations have 10 plus years

before the tail end of the baby boomers reach retirement age. Corporations who place themselves in that situation will find themselves next to the goal line without any time left on the clock.

We must invest in our current skilled resource pool before it dries up. This will become one of the most important roles for most managers in the future and one where the mentoring skills are lacking. I was very fortunate while starting my career in IBM to be mentored by whom I very affectionately call the "Gray Hairs". I did not mean it out of disrespect; rather I learned very early on that by teaming up with those who knew the business I was going to draw from their skill base. With that learning I have developed many close personal ties which are still current since leaving IBM 13 years ago. The skill base in the US is drying up, not from a lack of educated professionals; one only has to go to a major department store at midday to see the high number of store clerks who are in the early fifties and are wearing the gold watches received for their years of service in the corporate world. We do not have to go overseas for talent, we just have to go to the nearest supermarket. Project managers must now have to take on the responsibility to grow talent from within the ranks. Even in a matrix system you must grow your team's skill base for future work.

So to answer the original question", What do you do around here?", the project managers will have to be the chief mentor, planner, negotiator, cheerleader, strategist and participate in sales support. We will be the first to be hired and first to be fired. We need to be the ones that report with ethics and integrity the facts of the project even when they get ugly. If we choose not to take on these responsibilities, we will end up being the most expensive monkey in the store!