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Executive Actions For Project Success

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Introduction

“I wish that my boss could have taken this course.” “This is not the way we do project management where I work.” These and similar remarks are increasingly being made at the conclusion of much of today’s project management training. Indeed, as I write and speak to increasing numbers of project management practitioners at PMI conferences, and as I reflect upon the feedback provided by the thousands of employees who completed project management training and certification at the CIA where I was Director of that program, I see a gap between what increasingly better educated and skilled project managers need for success, and what they are getting from their organizations and their executives. Lets call this the executive gap. Leaders in the project management training industry that I have spoken to about this have offered confirmation for this executive gap; and not just here in the United States, but industry and world-wide. This paper is a shortened version of work that I have been passionately writing and speaking about recently. For more detail you are referred to the reference list at the end of this paper, to the proceedings of recent PMI Global Congresses¹ and to the February 2006 issue of PM Network Magazine.

As even a quick glance at the statistics show, project management is a growth² industry. And yet, even with increasing numbers of better trained project managers we still find huge and not necessarily improving³ project success rates. How can this be? How can more and better skilled project managers continue to fail at such large rates? This question was put to me by a senior executive of a large project-based organization when he asked me “How is it that even after I have hired hundreds of well qualified project managers we still can not seem to get enough projects successfully completed to satisfy our customers?” The answer is because project managers cannot succeed on their own. Project success is dependent to an increased degree not only on the efforts of the project manager, but also on the efforts of the executive as well. The problem is getting the executive⁴ to act for project success. This paper is written for project managers who would like to change the status quo, who would like to be the catalyst for action

¹ See proceedings of the PMI Global Congresses 2005-2008 in Toronto, Bangkok, Madrid, Seattle, Atlanta, and Denver.

² PMI Global Operations Center reports membership growth at the rate of over 200% world-wide for the 2002-2005 period, with even steeper rates of growth in the mid and far East regions.

³ See for example the Chaos Report for 2005 by the Standish Group: 84% of projects have time overruns and 56% of projects have cost overruns of greater than 50%.

⁴ Note that the term executive is being used broadly to include almost anyone in the organization who appears above the project manager on the organizational chart and who is capable of taking actions that impact the project manager.

within their own organization, and who would like to **get their executive to act for project success**.

What Has Changed

The big change over time has been to the **definition of project success**; it has been greatly expanded (Kerzner 2001, Archibald 2003). In the 1960s, the early days of project management, success was measured entirely in technical terms. Either the deliverable product worked or it didn't. During the 1970s that narrow definition was expanded to encompass completion on time, within budget, and at an acceptable level of quality. This has become known as the triple constraint and has been widely used as the basis for much of the project management industry. During the 1980s further expansion took place to include criteria of being accepted by the customer. And during the 1990s still more criteria were added, having to do with not disturbing the main work flow of the organization and without changing the corporate culture. This expansion⁵ has been difficult for some to deal with.

So, how can a project manager deal with the fact that the definition of project success has expanded so greatly? How can a project manager succeed when project goals include organizational and cultural impact? How can a project manager perform successfully when such a substantial portion of the definition of project success extends beyond the traditional project boundaries? The simple answer is that as project managers we cannot keep doing what we have been doing and expect to succeed. The answer is that our traditional control based approach toward the management of projects is becoming less effective; in that approach we sought to employ the planning as well as the monitoring and controlling process groups in the PMBOK® (PMI 2004). What we could not control we learned to influence, and what we could not influence we learned to be aware of so that we could be ready with corrective actions. The answer is that as project managers we must now turn to an increasing degree to the executive. We have, for better or worse, become **highly dependent on the executive**. Project success now depends on our ability to form a beneficial partnership with the executive. Project success now depends on getting executives to act.

Executive Actions

One of the highlights of the situation surrounding this topic of getting executives to act for project success is the existence of so many high quality and pertinent **sources of reference information**. I have read and re-read these references, used them extensively in my own pursuits in project management, and internalized them to such a degree that I have difficulty separating the ideas they contain from my own. An action that I wholeheartedly endorse for any project manager contemplating getting executives to act for project success is to scan the reference list at the end of this paper and read as many of these useful works as possible.

⁵ See the proceedings of the PMI Global Congress 2002 "Project Success – What Are the Criteria and Whose Opinion Counts"

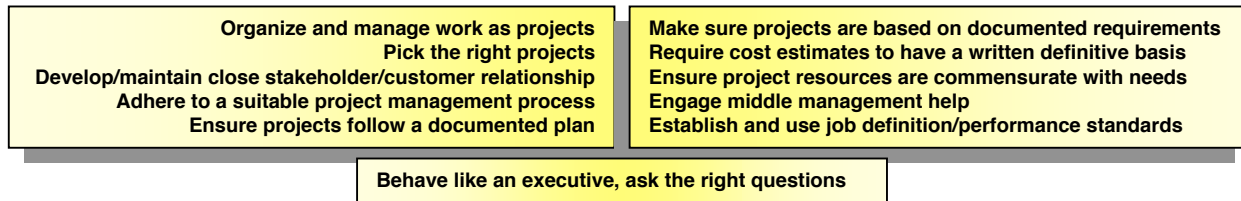


Exhibit 1 - Executive Actions

By all means, read extensively, get lots of experience, and **make a list for yourself of the actions that you would like your executive** to take that will help your project succeed. Alternately, to help get started, consider my list; it has been assembled and distilled during the past few years as I have increased the amount of consulting that I have done with executives who have wanted to help project managers (Exhibit 1). I have asked for and received many similar lists from executives that I have coached during workshops on this very subject. Those interactions, combined with my experiences managing and helping project managers, have led me to revise and refine this list. As much as possible I have trimmed the list to a minimum number of actions, I've focused on actions that are practical and achievable in most organizational cultures, and I have eliminated actions better suited to project managers and others. If this list were a tool, I would consider it be the "Swiss Army Knife" of executive actions for project success, focused on the essentials with a minimum of extraneous information. As with all tools I must point out, perhaps even caution, that this list does not work for all executives or all project managers in all situations. Skill and experience are required to use any tool as well as this list. Deciding what to include on this list and acting on it require considerable sensitivity to those involved and to the situation.

At the top of the list of executive actions are organizing the work into projects and then picking the right projects. Project managers can feel like fish out of water when they work in an environment that does not **organize and manage work as projects**. Much effort can be spent trying to convince and educate the myriad stakeholders about the merits of project basics, such as requirements definition, baselines, schedules, and configuration control. This unproductive and often frustrating time could be better spent if the department or section of the organization organized itself to be project based, if it were separated from the ongoing and repetitive operations. Project managers can easily drown when they have too many projects to work on. **Picking the right projects** can be as sophisticated as strategic portfolio management or as simple as doing only those projects for which the project managers and project teams have the capacity to do. I favor the simple approach: do only as many projects as can be done well; don't agonize over the decisions about which projects to do. Actual research into the optimum number of projects for a project manager to manage successfully is sparse; however the few works that I have come across do coincide with empirical evidence. Fewer projects are better; fewer projects mean more time spent per project. Fewer projects mean that ultimately more projects conclude successfully. The optimum number of projects per project manager seems to range between three and eight; more results in a quantum decline in the project success rate.

Executives have a unique responsibility to **develop and maintain close stakeholder and customer relationships** that complement and enhance the relationships formed by the project manager. The time invariably comes when an issue, concern, or decision needs to be addressed by someone other than the project manager. Project funding, priority, and requirements are often topics that benefit from this type of supportive intervention. Note that these executive relationships should be conducted so that the project manager's authority and responsibility are maintained and so that the project manager is kept in the loop and well informed. Ideally, it is the project manager who is serving up the topics for the executive to act on.

Project management is a discipline and as such benefits by **adhering to a suitable project management process**. Project managers who are at the top of their game have come to rely on executives to establish a standardized process for their organization to use. They seek to be held accountable for applying tailored versions of this process to each of their projects and they rely on others to do the same. They can, in the absence of executive action, develop and follow their own processes, but they recognize the limits in efficiency and effectiveness of doing so.

Project managers expect executives to ensure that they **follow a documented project plan** and **ensure that projects are based on documented requirements**. They expect to be given adequate time up front during the initial project phase to build these baseline documents and to be isolated from pressure to hastily proceed without them; they also expect to be held accountable for continuous controlled revisions to these documents through the project life cycle. To help with the understanding of these baseline documents executives should **require cost estimates to have a written definitive basis**. In return for managing their projects according to plan, project managers look to their executives to **ensure that project resources (time, people, and money) are commensurate with needs**. If shortages and/or changes occur, the executive should expect to receive an impact assessment from the project manager that has been developed in an environment without excessive pressure to absorb the change or simplistically do more with less. This impact assessment, which could serve as the basis for plan revisions, will be formulated with respect to the plans, requirements, and other documents that have been baselined.

Actions by the executive need to be taken to **engage middle management help** and to **establish and use job definitions and performance standards**. By holding middle managers responsible for supporting project managers and by insuring that career progression and growth is aligned with best practice project management the executive will create a long lasting and sustainable project based culture. They can demonstrate their commitment to this culture by **behaving like an executive and asking the right questions** of their project managers. They can acknowledge that their role as an executive is enhanced when they behave like a servant leader in a role supportive of the project manager. In this culture they will attract, retain and grow project management excellence.

Executive Questions

Here is a list that is an absolute favorite of the executives with whom I consult (Exhibit 2). One executive who I have known for years and have worked with recently has actually had this list reduced in size and laminated; he wears it around his neck attached behind his employee badge, and he glances casually at it when he finds himself in a meeting with a project manager. This list helps him to **behave like an executive and ask the right questions**. It helps minimize

traditional distractions to get into the project details, to solve the project issues, or to do the project manager's job for them. The list is my own; like the list of executive actions it has evolved over time. At this point it has become stable; I do occasionally add or subtract from it. It is also a tool that should be used with caution. It is offered as a starting point for executives who are looking to quickly and effectively begin behaving in a way that demonstrates their support for project managers. At the top of the list is the extraordinarily effective question for the executive to ask, "What can I do to help?"

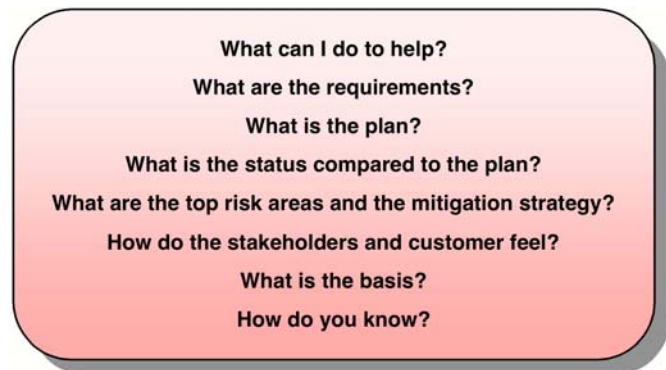


Exhibit 2 - Executive Questions

Getting The Executive To Act

A well-known international sports shoe manufacturer has built a marketing campaign around the expression "Just Do It." That phrase can also serve as the foundation for understanding how the project manager can get the executive to act for project success. As a rule, project managers have **far more ability and authority than they use**. In fact, executives frequently appreciate and indeed expect project managers to demonstrate initiative in helping them understand and act for project success. Many executives are action oriented – they just need to know what action to take, why they should take it, when they should act, and how they should do it. The project manager is uniquely positioned to get the executive to act for project success; indeed, project managers can excel at getting their executive to act for project success (Whitten 2005).

A couple of very important points constrain how much and how fast an executive can act for project success. It is the prudent project manager that understands these points and uses them to regulate their relationship with their executive as well as their own expectations. **Executives have varying degrees of interest and ability** in project management. Picking an executive already in-tune with the discipline of project management will more likely yield someone with a genuine interest in a partnership with the project manager, a partnership aimed at improving the performance not only of the project manager's specific projects, but those of the entire organization as well.

How a project manager communicates has at least as much effect on the executive as what he communicates. Much has been done to elevate the level of understanding of how to “sell” project management to senior executives (Thomas 2002), this excellent body of work instructs project managers to emphasize alignment of project management and project goals with corporate goals and value statements. It identifies the value of using business language and **putting the project in context** of business value where project aspects that relate to financial, growth, customer satisfaction, competition, and sales are emphasized. A key that appears throughout the topic of communicating with executives about project management is the need to identify what triggers the executive’s interest, to develop a set of responses tailored to each trigger, and to back up each response with evidence that is relevant to each individual executive. If the executive’s hot button is growth, then framing the project management related action for the executive in terms of growth would be the most effective communication approach.

Organizations have limitations too. We can turn to the body of work that addresses project management maturity for an understanding of the limits in what actions an organization can succeed at taking (Ibbs 1997, Kerzner 2001, Crawford 2002). This work teaches us that the lower maturity organizations are characterized by ad-hoc activity with little or no formal project procedures; individual heroics that occasionally result in success are rewarded. In contrast, formal well-defined and repeatable processes that are undergoing continuous improvement characterize high maturity organizations; success is intentional and can more easily be replicated. The executive actions must conform to the **maturity of the organization**. They must also conform to the **organization’s readiness level for change**. Organizations can only change when the timing is right and even then the pace of change is limited. It does little good to push for a change if the individuals and/or the organization is not ready; in fact, it is counterproductive and “sours the well water” for future attempts at similar changes. High readiness levels are characterized by strong desires for change and readiness for it; a strong resistance to change characterizes low readiness levels. Moderate readiness levels are characterized by a desire for change but a lack of readiness. The executive actions must conform to the change readiness level of the organization.

Project managers have at their disposal an extremely effective tool for overcoming barriers and getting their executive to act for project success. Through the understanding and use of power the project manager can accomplish a tremendous amount. Power refers to the ability of the project manager to influence others to act for the benefit of their project; it is a resource that enables compliance or commitment from others (Maurer 1996, Pinto 1996, Verma 1995). We can recognize that as project managers we do have opportunities to **develop and use sources of power that others don’t**. Specifically, we are the experts; no one knows more about our project than we do. This knowledge can serve as the basis for opinions, decisions, and actions that are rational and well supported. This source of power can distinguish the actions we want the executive to take from the blur of other activity that fills their job. A second source of power at the project manager’s disposal is their perceived association with others who are influential. Successful project managers develop and cultivate relationships with a vast array of stakeholders

that extend far beyond the immediate bounds of their project. The fact that so many projects are managed in matrix organizations further enhances this effect. These connections are perceived by others as a significant source of power, one that can and should be used by the project manager to get executives to act for project success.

And now for the “silver bullet” approach that can work in virtually all situations, with differing viewpoints, with differing levels of project management ability, with various business contexts, across organizational maturity barriers, and across change readiness levels. The approach is to **form a Project Management Council**. It can be the key to identifying the actions for the executive to take for project success. It can amplify the power of the project manager to get executives to act for project success. It is my favorite approach. Referred to variously as a project support office, project management working group, project management office, strategic project office, project management center of excellence, and project management community of practice these are organizations formed explicitly for the purpose of focusing on how project management is/can/should be practiced within the organization (Crawford 2002, Rad 2002, Englund 2003, Bolles 2002, Dai 2002, Bridges 2000). My ideal project management council is comprised entirely of motivated project management practitioners who have volunteered for the assignment. They are experienced, visionary, change agents. As thought leaders they know how project management is done and how it should be done. They care deeply about their chosen profession and are concerned with the wellbeing of other project managers. A project management council can and should serve as a link between project managers and executives. Chartering the project management council to identify the barriers to project success and to make recommendations to overcome these barriers and then giving it the latitude to explore the paths that follow will invigorate its members as well as the organization.

Now Go Do It

Victory, when it comes to getting executives to act for project success, is incremental and cumulative. It does not come all at once, and it does not occur in all elements or all executives of the organization at the same pace. Since by definition we are dealing with behavior and change, we must recognize that we are dealing with what is usually a slow evolution rather than a sudden revolution. Executives and organizations have spent years becoming who they are. The good news is that the cumulative effects of **modestly paced, genuine change** in an executive and in an organization is enduring. The project manager who understands the changing definition of project success and who understands the critical dependent relationship necessary with the executive has joined the evolution. The project manager that tailors the actions for their executive to take based on differing viewpoints, the business context, and the organizational maturity has moved the evolution forward. The project manager who develops and uses sources of power and who takes the bold step of forming a project management council has accomplished a successful evolution not only for themselves but also for the organization and executives as well.

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Michael (Mike) O'Brochta, who has managed hundreds of projects during the past thirty years, is also an experienced line manager, author, lecturer, trainer and consultant. He holds a master's degree in project management, a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, and is certified as a PMP®. As Zozer Inc. President, he is helping organizations raise their level of project management performance. As senior project manager at the CIA, he led the project management and systems engineering training and certification program to mature practices agency-wide. Mr. O'Brochta's other current work includes the development of standards and courseware for the new Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers, project management office formation and management, the development of project management life cycle methodologies, project management maturity assessments, project management occupation development, and the creation and delivery of successful project management classes and workshops for participants at various knowledge levels. He serves at the PMI corporate level on the Community Development Management Advisory Group and at the chapter level where he built and led the international PMIWDC Chapter-to-Chapter program. Mr. O'Brochta has written and presented papers at every PMI North American Global Congress during the past decade as well as at many international, and regional conferences. His recent presentations at PMI conferences in Denver and Sao Paulo drew the largest audiences at those conferences. Topics that he is currently passionate about include how to get executives to act for project success and great project managers. Since his recent climb of another of the world's seven summits, he has been exploring the relationship between project management and mountain climbing. Mike can be reached at mobrochta@zozerinc.com