

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

Project Management - Art or Skill?

by Fumiko Kondo

Abstract How can organizations develop people with strong and effective project management skills? Is a project manager someone whose potential can be identified and developed systematically? This article provides a roadmap for identifying future project managers and an approach for developing their capabilities.

In most organizations, project management is an unrecognized discipline; it is assumed that one can become a project manager (PM) after demonstrating a talent as, say, a software developer or business analyst. Thus, a stellar employee may become a PM with little knowledge of what it takes to manage projects effectively. Too often, the result is that new PMs find themselves unprepared for the role. Their first project fails to meet its goals, and questions arise about whether they can handle subsequent projects.

There is a better way. Organizations should understand the qualities that make for effective project managers, identify the right people for the job, and groom them for the role.

The right stuff: nature or nurture?

Can people be trained to be a PM, or are the skills needed for project management something one has innately and cannot really be taught?

For a PM, the "right stuff" has two components to it. As with most professions, project management requires a technical skill set that one can learn through training, but it also requires a particular set of behavioral traits that present a challenge to training programs. The behavioral component can come with experience, but not everybody has the personal qualities that make them prime prospects. Organizations need to understand this if they are to develop strong project management.

Technical skills

To be an effective PM requires the ability to plan projects, assess project status, and identify issues of risk. These are skills that a person can learn.

Planning. The ability to plan means being able to identify the task that needs to be performed, including the various dependencies within the task, and to develop estimates of the time and resources needed to complete the project. Planning ability might involve knowing how to use available software, such as Microsoft® Project or another project management tool.

Assessing project status. Every project manager needs to know how to determine the status of an ongoing project against the details of its plan. The methodologies and techniques involved—earned value analysis (EVA), schedule

performance index (SPI) analysis, and cost performance index (CPI) indicators—are tools that can be learned.

Managing risk. PMs can also be taught how to identify issues of risk by setting up a project charter that clarifies the objectives, scope, resources, and timing for the project—and then how to use project management techniques to manage these risks.

Organizations should be prepared to provide certification courses, in-house training, or some other form of high-quality training in the skills needed by new or prospective PMs.

Behavioral skills: the art of project management

The behavioral component of the project management skill set includes three crucial elements: the capacity to anticipate, attention to detail, and the ability to persuade others. These capabilities constitute a kind of “art” in a project manager’s bag of talents. They are in part inherent personal qualities, in part the product of relevant experience, and only in part teachable.

Thinking ahead. Some people are great at focusing on the task at hand and don’t worry about what’s ahead. For example, helpdesk technicians must answer immediate questions, fix existing problems, and close the work ticket, but they aren’t generally expected to foresee what will come up next. A project manager, in contrast, needs to see around the bend. In the case of the helpdesk example, the PM’s job is to anticipate what kinds of calls for technical assistance *might* come in.

So, too, with other kinds of projects. Even with the most comprehensive planning, problems can arise in the execution of a project that could derail it if they are not anticipated and managed. A PM must think ahead and be ready for all contingencies.

Attention to detail. Most projects comprise many pieces that have to come together, involve numerous people working together, and pose many requirements that have to be met. The project manager must be able to see not only the overall picture, but also the details and how they fit together. The person who thinks only in terms of the big picture is not likely to be an effective PM, because project management requires the ability to think through many levels of detail *and* see the big picture.

Ability to influence. No matter how much planning goes into a project, a PM’s ability to deliver depends on the ability to influence people. Team members must understand their tasks and know why they are important, and project stakeholders (e.g., the project’s customers and executive sponsors) must be kept informed of progress so that the decisions they make align with the goals of the project. A PM must be able to communicate with all interested parties and manage expectations along the way to a successful project completion.

How to do it?

How can an organization prepare its project managers for their demanding roles? It's not so difficult to deliver on the technical skills side, through training and coursework, but the behavioral side of the equation, the "art" of project management, presents a complicated challenge.

The experiential approach. An organization can't just give PMs a training course and expect them to learn how to see ahead, pay attention to details, or influence people. What's needed is to identify those who have the right behavioral traits that might make them good PMs and then give them experience.

If an organization uses the concept of *competencies* to describe its roles, it should incorporate the ability to anticipate, attend to details, and influence people as competencies that apply to project managers. If succession planning is in place, the same competencies should help identify future project management stars.

Potential PMs can be tasked with managing low-risk, temporary projects, ideally with the help of mentors. An example might be as simple as preparing a report that requires a number of people working together—someone who gathers data and enters it into a spreadsheet, someone who creates mathematical and statistical formulas, and someone with writing skills. A prospective PM could cut his or her teeth on this project as a way of gaining experience and testing behavioral skills.

As potential PMs demonstrate behavioral competencies, they can then be trained in the technical skills needed to become full-fledged project managers.

Conclusion

It is critical for organizations to develop project plans and execute them successfully, showing results that demonstrate their value. Without strong, effective project managers with the right skill sets, successful projects are impossible.

There is a much better way to develop project managers than just picking people who are good at what they're already doing and plunging them into a role for which they may or may not be suited. That is to identify candidates in terms of relevant behavioral competencies, groom them by giving them experience, and finally training them in the requisite technical skills.

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