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Emotional Intelligence!
Key Differentiator for Successful Project Managers

First in a series on Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers

By Marge Combe

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you?

- ❖ A 'blame controversy' arises between a project manager and a customer about who was at fault in misinterpreted requirements.
- ❖ Although a project manager captured the requirements the client requested, the client is unhappy because he didn't really get what he wanted.
- ❖ Poor interpersonal relations between some members of a project team threaten to undermine the success of a project.

Project managers need to interact favorably and clearly with project sponsors, stakeholders, and project team members. Success in this endeavor is sometimes compromised by stress-creating deadlines, changes to project requirements, ambiguous requirements, frustrated or unengaged project sponsors/stakeholders, and differences in opinions in the project team.

When project managers react to this common stress in a way that is deemed unprofessional, they damage their reputations and the reputation of the entire project management organization. When project managers fail to effectively read and respond to emotions and 'wants' of their clients and stakeholders, they may be viewed less as leaders and more as order takers.

While we recognize that the best project managers have a way of effectively interacting with people, we don't often realize that this ability to interact well can be learned.

In 1995 Dr. Daniel Goleman wrote a groundbreaking book titled 'Emotional Intelligence' that pointed out that emotional intelligence is as important – and arguably more predictive of success – as native I.Q. and technical skills combined. Thirty years of research backs Goleman's assertions, and demonstrates that, like technical skills, emotional intelligence can be learned and can be a strong differentiating factor in people's success in their work.

Emotional intelligence can be described as having two basic components:

- ❖ Recognizing, understanding and **managing** our **own** emotions, and
- ❖ Recognizing, understanding and **influencing** the emotions of **others**.

Understanding and managing a project manager's own emotions

A common reaction to stress is for emotions to be heightened and reactions to be less measured. This is triggered by a portion of the brain called the amygdala, which is responsible for the 'fight or flight' response. When the amygdala takes charge in response to a stress trigger, it reduces perspective and judgment, causes a digging-in sense of certainty, and actually increases the chance for errors. It may be seen as:

- ❖ Argumentative, blaming or defensive behavior
- ❖ Reduced ability to collaborate or compromise
- ❖ Assertiveness or aggression that is inappropriate for the situation
- ❖ Backing away and not dealing with a project problem – avoiding conflict
- ❖ Lack of focus or direction in someone who is usually well-organized.

It is possible for project managers to learn to recognize and intervene in their behavioral response to these stress triggers. When they have learned what it feels like in these 'emotional hijacking' situations, they can use techniques to step back, take a deep breath, and ask questions to obtain information that will help to remove the emotions that generated the 'fight or flight' response.

Understanding and influencing the emotions of others

In dealing with project requirements, it is important for project managers to not only hear the requests of their clients; they must explore and appreciate the emotional connection their customers have to their visions of the outcome. Paraphrasing a Chinese proverb, "Ideas are like children; your own are always the most attractive". A project manager may not be able to give clients all they describe in their vision, because of technological or other constraints, or because cost and schedule issues become prohibitive. This can be frustrating for the client. But if the project manager understands what the client is emotionally attached to, she may be able to offer alternative visions that effectively deliver on the emotional need. Instead of being frustrated with the project manager, the client may find himself lauding the leadership of the project manager who influenced and shaped his vision into a workable reality.

In dealing in team settings, it is equally important to seek out and understand the emotions of others. In the time pressures inherent in projects, it is not unusual to want to put aside concerns of teammates or suppliers in the hope that, whatever their misgivings, the project can come through on schedule. But a more effective approach is for a project manager to take the time to ask the questions that show appreciation for the teammates' concerns. In some cases, serious risks can be uncovered sooner and mitigated. In other cases, simple appreciation can be powerful in convincing a reluctant team member who feels unheard.

Learning to be emotionally intelligent

Spurred by Goleman's work, a body of knowledge has been developed over the last ten years, and has been effectively used to teach people in diverse jobs to become more emotionally intelligent.

Is training in emotional intelligence part of the curriculum of your project manager training? It is now readily available from reputable consultants certified in emotional intelligence. It is best inculcated into your culture through not only training, but frequent 'practice and feedback' sessions, where project managers learn through experience how to continue to improve in their emotionally intelligent interactions.

Organizational benefits from training and practicing emotional intelligence can be measured in not only satisfaction, but in reduced rework, more accurate requirements, fewer realized risks, and more reliable on-time delivery. Other fields have found surprisingly strong benefits of emotional intelligence in their work environments. For example, a Harvard Business Review article pointed out that doctors who are emotionally intelligent have significantly fewer malpractice claims filed against them. Emotional intelligence is more than making people feel good; it is a differentiating factor in the success of your project organization.

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Marge Combe is a coach/consultant with Vernal Management Consultants, LLC (VMC), a firm specializing in the professional development and effective business practices of leaders and leadership teams (www.vernalmgmt.com). VMC currently coaches a number of leaders and business owners in the project management profession, including some in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and South America. Marge joined VMC in 2008 after more than 35 years in portfolio management, strategic planning and large-scale change management for Northwestern Mutual and Whirlpool Corporation. She has leveraged that experience and a passion for coaching and mentoring into a consulting and leadership coaching role with special focus on her roots: the people side of change management, planning, and project management. Marge is a former PMI board director and Chair of the Strategic Planning and Program Alignment Committee. She was instrumental in shaping and leading a Fortune 500 Project Management Benchmarking Forum. She is certified in coaching through Lominger International and in emotional intelligence through the Institute for Health and Human Potential. She was the 2007 recipient of the Woman of Influence Award for mentoring. Marge can be contacted at mcombe@vernalmgmt.com). For information about Vernal Management Consultants, visit www.vernalmgmt.com.