

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINTS – APRIL 2008

### Project Management; beyond the formal definition

*By Ammar W. Mango*

Before attempting to define what project management means, it is important to mention that the Project Management Institute (PMI) already has a concise definition of what project management is. In its well known standard, "A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)," PMI defines project management as "The application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements. While most agree with PMI's definition, sometimes I feel it puts too much focus on project management as a science and less focus on it as a practical tool to improve projects performance.

To me, Project Management is simply: Leading projects to a successful conclusion by leading, planning, organizing, and controlling the project stakeholders, resources and the project environment.

As with the actual application of project management, there are so many elements to be taken into consideration when talking about project management, and they need to be addressed in a timely fashion to ensure project success. A closer examination of these elements might shed better light on what project management is really about.

Leading is a key element, because Project management requires leaders who can influence others to act in ways that will improve chances of project success. This might sound as a simple undertaking, but it isn't. Influencing others is difficult because people are different. Each individual and even business entities have their own interests, values, concerns and background that are unique and require special attention and focus on the part of the leader, i.e. project manager, to successfully influence them.

Another consideration related to leading is that leaders also cannot try to influence others at all costs. For long term success leading should be based on solid values and ethics. Leadership to succeed long term should be based on win-win mindset and fair basis. Coercive and authoritarian approaches to leadership seldom serve the project purposes given the uniqueness of the stakeholders in the projects and the different ways they require to be influenced. For example, relying on authoritarian style with the client will get the project leader nowhere as she or he has no direct authority over the client, and many of the other project stakeholders. So, the project manager should be able to apply other forms of power to influence others including expert, reward, and referent powers.

The second element to consider is successful conclusion, which is usually defined in terms of finishing the project on time, within budget, with the right scope, and the right quality. Project Success is the goal of project management. It is the only reason why project management should be applied to a project. If a project can succeed without project management, then applying project management might be futile. The main reason companies around the world are implementing project management is because they are

finding out that applying proper project management improves their chances of project success.

One recent study shows that 60% of projects in 2006 are considered challenged projects. Challenged to me implies that their success is questionable. The reason is that even in this day and age most projects are still not being managed properly.

Planning is the backbone of project management. This is why it is considered an important element in project management. Companies report project success directly proportionate to the amount of time spent on planning. While most will agree that planning is key to project success, however, few managers are willing to commit or support a sufficient planning period on projects. Most managers are in a hurry to do, without taking enough time to prepare by planning. This leads to project failure.

Imagine a football team hastily playing a key game without proper practice and preparation. Failure is almost inevitable. So, no coach will push his team into a game before they practice, learn the opponent's strategies, strengths and weaknesses, learn their own strengths and weaknesses, assess the risks they might face or what could go wrong during the game, and finally think about the tactics and strategies they will use during the game. Same thing applies in project management, practice in project management terms means planning. Just like you would not expect a sports team to win a game without preparation, you cannot expect a project team to succeed without planning.

Organizing is also a big part of project management. Organizing includes organizing work, people, and resources so they are utilized in the most optimal way possible to achieve project success. Organizing includes organizing work into a project, by defining clearly the scope of the project. What is included and more importantly what is not included in the project.

Another important part of organizing is dividing clearly the project work into phases, with clear deliverables from each phase. As they say, you eat an elephant, one part at a time. Same thing applies to projects, trying to do everything in one "gulp" will lead the team to choke on the work and to take too much risk. A better solution is to organize the work of the project into phases that become a roadmap towards project completion. Each phase answers some essential questions related to the project, reducing the risk and helping the team gain more knowledge and insight towards completing the final deliverable. For example, many projects start with a feasibility study. This will ensure that more information is available about the project and what it entails and its consequences before more money is committed to the project. This way, certain high risks can be addressed before the core work and the expensive items begin. So, a feasibility phase for a bridge project will ensure that key questions are answered, like is this project doable technically? Can we raise sufficient funds to complete it? Is it going to solve the traffic problems we are facing? Committing to the actual work before answering such key projects lead to project cancellation, failure, and a waste of effort and money to most stakeholders involved.

Controlling is another important part of project management. Nothing goes exactly as planned. This is why controlling is important. It gives insight into how well the project is progressing, compared to the plan. As a result of this comparison, management can gain an insight and answers to key questions like are we on time? Are we on budget? Are

quality requirements being met? Does the work completed match the work planned? Are there any issues? What risks actually occurred? Which ones did not? How much more time do we need to finish? How much more money? Are there any anticipated issues? All of these are important questions that require an answer during project progress. Answering these questions on a regular basis helps pinpoint problems early, and the earlier they are pinpointed, the more chances there are to fix them, or at least prevent them from causing project failure.

Resources include people, organizations, material, equipment, facilities, and information used to accomplish project work. Of all of them, the hardest to manage might be the people aspect. It is a known fact that most project problems are caused by people, not technology. This is why the “people” aspect of project management is key to the success of a project manager.

Stakeholders are people or entities who influence or are influenced by the work of the project or its outcomes, or involved in the project work. These include clients, sponsor, project manager, team members, the performing organization, suppliers, the government, the public, end users, and many more. Managing stakeholders and their expectations is one of the toughest challenges faced by a project manager on a given project. Each of these stakeholders has varying interests and levels of influence on the project. Understanding these stakeholders, their needs, their influence, whether positive or negative, is key to project success. Underestimating the effect a stakeholder has on a project, or her or his role on the project has led to many historical project failures.

Project environment includes things like culture and regulations. Understanding the project environment is key to a successful project manager. This includes organizational culture, cultural differences among stakeholders, market situation, competition, regulations, etc. All of these can greatly influence the project success.

So, leading projects to a successful conclusion by leading, planning, organizing, and controlling the project stakeholders, resources and the project environment, is what project management is about.

However, as evident from our discussion of what this definition entails, it is easy to define project management, but it is much harder to master it.

Defining project management is one thing, but the real value is in its proper application, which is not as easy as many assume it is. However, the value reaped from its application makes it all worthwhile. This is why, worldwide, organizations are investing in the development and sustaining of project management systems including processes, training, and software tools to improve their projects performance.

## About the Author:



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With over seventeen years of global experience in Project Management & Leadership consulting and training, he is considered an international expert on the subjects and enjoys a superb reputation as an inspirational trainer and consultant. He holds a bachelor's degree from Jordan University and a Master's Degree in Construction Engineering and Management from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. He has been certified as a Project Management Professional (PMP) by the Project Management Institute (PMI) since 1991, and as a Six Sigma Black Belt by the American Society for Quality. He served as Vice President, Education, PMI Great Lakes Chapter in 1993, and is the founder and currently an active member of the PMI Jordanian Chapter. Ammar is also an international correspondent for PMForum and PM World Today in Jordan. Additional information about Mr. Mango can be found at <http://www.pmforum.org/pm%20forum%20team/index.htm#5>. Ammar can be contacted at [amango@methodcorp.com](mailto:amango@methodcorp.com).