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Great Project Work Unappreciated!

By Michael O'Brochta, PMP

Introduction

The feeling is unmistakable; you have accomplished some great work, but it goes unappreciated. Didn't anyone notice, or care? You may have crafted a terrific project plan only to be met with indifference, or worse, pushback from your executive about why you appear to be trying to bankrupt the organization with all of the "unnecessary" planning tasks. You may have developed a written project charter and been looking for your bosses' approval signature only to be told, "that your organization doesn't do charters" because they impinge on the line managers authority. Never mind that this stuff works; it must work, after all these techniques are reflected in standards such as the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge.

Thanks to organizations like the Project Management Institute and the plethora of high quality project management training providers the workforce now has far more and better-educated project managers; you may have encountered numerous testimonials to the effectiveness of these techniques by those present at PMI Global Congresses. So, why bother striving for excellence? Why endeavor to apply project management best practices if you are likely to be the only one of a few who knows or cares?

A Story

To illustrate just how pronounced the indifference can be we can turn to the music experiment conducted by the Washington Post newspaper organization. One fine morning a nondescript youngish man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and baseball cap was commissioned by the newspaper to position himself against a wall beside a trash basket at the entrance to the L'Enfant Plaza Metro rail station. Placing an open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play his violin.

It was during this normally busy three-quarters of an hour that over one thousand commuters passed him by yet only a handful of them paused long enough to take notice; and only \$32 and change was contributed to his open case. The man's name was Joshua Bell; he is one of the finest classical musicians in the world. He played some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made. Yet, almost no one noticed! Yet, three days before he appeared at the Metro station, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where merely pretty good seats went for \$100 each. The question I

asked myself as I read the accounting of this story in the April 8, 2007 Washington Post newspaper was “how could this happen?” How could a great musician play great music but no one hears? How can project managers practice great project management and not be noticed?

I’m sad to say that the gap between what project managers need from their executives and organizations in order to practice great project management and what they are getting is widening. Unfortunately, it seems that a majority of organizations still don't get it. According to the December 2008 "Improving Government Performance and Delivery" report by The Council for Excellence In Government, in cooperation with the Office of Management and Budget, approximately 80% of the Federal program managers surveyed reported that they receive little support from their executives.

I saw much the same situation within the Central Intelligence Agency when I built and ran their project management training and certification program. There we had thousands of employees per year returning to their jobs after training and certification with measurably better project management skill-sets; yet they reported back that they were frustrated by an unsupportive environment.

If a great project manager does great project management but no one notices...was he really any good? Most certainly, the answer is “Yes.” However, it is a conditional “Yes...but.”

Some Hope

Acknowledging and appreciating talented project managers requires first and foremost - a supportive work environment. In 1977 Robert Greenleaf wrote the book titled "Servant Leadership" which for many represented the start of a powerful management movement. This movement is centered on the concept of creating an environment supportive of the employee; in this environment the first question asked by executive management is "what can I do to help?"

This powerful approach has been repeatedly shown over the past quarter century to be responsible for driving project management based organizations as well as others to higher levels of maturity and success. Indeed, a close look at how organizational maturity has become defined by PMI and others reveals that an environment that is supportive of and adaptive to the project managers needs tops the scale. It doesn't have to be another version of the “Joshua Bell” story.

Approaches for enacting the "what can I do to help" type of supportive project environment are well understood; practitioners and thought leaders have been writing about this for several years. The "How To Get Executives To Act For Project Success" paper published in the PMI 2008 North America Global Congress proceedings advocates the formation of a Project Management Council where a handful of dedicated and visionary

project managers from within the organization focus on identifying the executive actions for project success and then help carry out those actions.

This approach can be effective in numerous forms and at multiple levels within an organization. For example, when a group of project management thought leaders that I was privileged to join, including some industry giants, met in December 2008 in Washington DC to discuss this very topic at the Federal level, they produced their own list of executive actions titled "A Project Management Manifesto" for re-building America; it advocates the broad use of project management and it advocates the creation of a federal project management career path. That gathering was reported and described on December 23, 2008 on www.pmforum.org. This manifesto is but one of the significant movements pointing in the same direction; The Council for Excellence In Government and the PMI Government Relations Office are also advocating for movement in this direction.

Conclusion

Project managers, both federal and commercial, who are looking for their great work to be acknowledged and supported, do have reason to feel encouraged. Movements continue to be afoot to stimulate environmental changes that are directed at spotlighting the needs of project managers. Since, according to Ram Charan and Geoffrey Colvin in their June 21, 1999 Fortune Magazine article, the number reason for Chief Executive Officer failure is “bad execution...not getting things done,” project managers are well positioned to pave the way for executive success; and in doing so, their own. Project management, after all, is all about getting things done.

About the Author:**Michael O'Brochta***Author*

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