

EXPERT SERIES

The "Expert Series" is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions' associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

Competencies of IT Project Managers

Art, science, leadership, and managership combined

by Bob Wourms

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT COMPETENCIES OF PROJECT MANAGERS. Some focus on the "art" vs. the "science" of project management; others differentiate between "leaders" and "managers." Both conclude that successful project managers need a mixture of the two. The leader/art side requires strong communication, visioning, and interpersonal skills, while the manager/science side requires detailed knowledge of methodology and tools, plus strong analysis and problem-solving skills.

Like the general project manager, those that manage large IT projects also require a mixture of these two disciplines plus an understanding of the technology being developed. In many ways, the competencies of the successful IT project manager correlate with the three organizational competencies of a successful IT Project Office: (1) people skills, (2) methodology and process knowledge, and (3) technology understanding.

PEOPLE SKILLS

Talking the talk. Without question, the most important competency of the project manager is the ability to communicate with others: in one-on-one sessions, in small groups, and before larger audiences. The project manager must be able to articulate the final vision of the product and sell its benefits to all constituents, including the end user. Often this involves one-on-one persuasive skills to convince the executive sponsor, the IT boss, the CFO, the project team members, the vendors, etc. to take specific action or support some new process to reach the future vision. Without these persuasive skills, people would not be assured of the end result and would question the direction set by the project manager and would spend considerable amount of time discussing the issues internally before making their own decision.

Communication+. In addition to strong communication skills, the project manager needs interpersonal skills of listening, empathy, showing recognition and praise. Issues crop up continuously throughout a project life cycle, which can change the product scope, the schedule and price, and/or the risk of successfully completing the project. The project manager must be actively listening to anyone willing to verbalize concerns. This will not only develop respect from the team, but will also provide early warning indicators of problems ahead. While listening and communicating with others the project manager should show empathy for what that individual or group is going through. It is important to understand the total environment and be able to restate that concern back to individuals so they know that you understand and care about their concerns — even if nothing can be done to satisfy their requests.

Motivation. One of the more significant techniques of the project manager is that of motivating the staff. This is most effectively accomplished by giving recognition and praise to those achieving their objectives. People want to feel important and will usually put in the time to accomplish a task, knowing that they are being recognized in front of their peers.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS KNOWLEDGE

In addition to people skills, the successful project manager must also understand and follow standard project management methodology and organizational processes. Knowledge of the Project Management Institute's (PMI) *A Guide to the Project Management Body Of Knowledge* (PMBOK®)

Guide), Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) methodology, and organizational policies will make the project flow much more smoothly and quickly. It is also the responsibility of the project manager to ensure that all project team members understand and follow the standard processes. If every project manager had his or her own method, then team members squander time and effort as they learn yet another project manager's method. Likewise, the project manager could not depend on status reports from subordinates who had not yet mastered the technique. Without standard processes, the project manager could not identify the critical path, and would be at a severe disadvantage in allocating resources for upcoming phases of the project.

THE ORGANIZATION'S ROLE

Adhering to the standard methodology is as much of an organizational competency as it is an individual project manager competency. No matter how "process savvy" an individual project manager is, if everyone is using a different process, only the long-term project teams will show signs of success. This is because they (over a period of time) have probably developed some best practice processes for their team. Once everyone in an organization has been trained and follows the standard process, then success can be gained across the organization. At this time, it is very critical for the individual project manager to understand, follow, and coach the team to follow the process.

TECHNOLOGY UNDERSTANDING

Understanding the technology being utilized on a project, whether hardware or software, will provide the IT project manager with an advantage over those that don't have a clue. There are many purists within the project management world who will say that a good project manager can manage anything. However, there are many examples of IT project managers who lost control of a project because their technical leads provided erroneous estimates or faulty reasons for falling behind schedule or purchased unneeded software; and this was allowed to take place simply because the overall project manager did not have sufficient technical background to know the difference.

This does not imply the project manager should be an expert in technology — but should have sufficient knowledge to understand and question requests coming from the technical staff and to have a good feel for whether the estimates are reasonable.

This technical understanding along with solid communication skills allows the IT project manager to explain technical issues to the non-technical members of the community, while gaining additional respect from the technical members.

By developing competencies in all three dimensions, the IT project manager will gain the trust of the project team, will be more likely to deliver quality products on time and within budget, and will effectively promote the end product to the user community as well as executive management.

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