

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.

The Project Office Staff

Focus on Talent, First

by Dr. Jimmie West, PMP

MARCUS BUCKINGHAM, CO-AUTHOR OF THE BOOK *FIRST BREAK ALL THE RULES*, SPOKE AT THE RECENT PROJECTWORLD SYMPOSIUM IN BOSTON. Many of the things he said seemed very common-sensical to me. I had the same reaction when I finished reading Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In both cases, the pearls of wisdom seemed more valuable because they were able to communicate them in a more effective manner than most of us are gifted with. I was immediately able to relate what I heard from Marcus Buckingham to the topic of hiring and staffing the project office.

Rather than rely on the traditional manner of finding the right people to staff the project office, I realized, we should be focusing on finding people with the talent to work in the environment of a functioning project office. Let me try to relate Marcus Buckingham's views to the task of hiring the right talent.

Break the Rules

The book's title should give all the clues that are needed to figure out what he means. Conventional wisdom would indicate that the project office should be operated and maintained by the most senior people, with the most experience, and the most training. Conventional wisdom says that we staff the project office with people who have all of the credentials. While this is usually the practice in staffing situations in many organizations, there are typically several problems that arise as a result.

One of them is that the people we hire may not be the best ones for the jobs. Yes, they fill the description in the area of experience and seniority, but they lack one key factor - passion. Buckingham does not use the word passion; I do. I use it because over the years, my own common sense has shown me that if a person does not have the passion for their work, they will not be motivated to do it well. They will be motivated to do it well enough to get by.

Buckingham uses the word talent instead of passion. Talent is described simply as something you do everyday without thinking about it. Talent is something that you could apply in such a manner as to be productive and effective.

PM Talents

What kind of talents do we need for the project office staff? Looking at the field of project managers there are a variety that pop into mind. We need the talent for looking at the details building and managing a schedule. We need the skills for collecting and analyzing data from the project. We need the talent for managing the relationships with the various customers and stakeholders of the project office. We need the talent for looking at the pieces of a puzzle and arranging them in such a manner as to create a coherent whole. These talents reside in a variety of forms and in a variety of experiences and in a variety of education. To make a great project office, the first thing to do is to select for talent. I would add, look for passion as well.

Fear of Frustration

Another potential problem is one I have found while teaching a project office course around the country. People who come to this course have continually asked whether or not the project managers should all be reporting to the project office or to some functional area. My favorite response is "it depends."

It depends on what you want the project office to be. If the project office is to be the center of excellence and you are looking to apply consistency to the project management effort, then I would say yes. Asking the students why they asked this question revealed that their real concern was not the role of project manager but the title of project manager.

It seems that the candidates for project manager roles were also the experts in their field, be it engineer, application developer, architect, educator, or contracting specialist. What they were resistant to was the title change and the fact that they would not be able to practice their skills in their chosen field. In other words, they wouldn't be able to practice their talents.

Overcoming this fear requires an effort to allay their fears through education. Project managers do not automatically forget their years of experience in their field. They bring that with them. The fact that the title may change from civil engineer or business analyst to project manager indicates that they have been given a different title and role to practice their talent. I urge my students to focus on selling these potential project managers on what they will be doing and not on the title.

For example, the best application programmer has been selected to become a project manager. The thing to do to help them understand their new role is to ensure them that the projects they will lead will still be in application development. By doing this consistently and by following your guideline to use him or her on application development projects, you will alleviate the fears of those project managers.

Finally, for a project office to be successful, it is important to identify what level it is going to be in the organization, what will be its primary purpose, and who will it serve. From this, it will be easier to begin to define the talents needed to be effective as a purveyor of project management services. The staffing talent does not always need to be the best and the brightest in each group. Realistically, there may be times when the best and the brightest is not the right choice. The point is to bring together the people who have the talents to be productive on a repeated basis and who have a passion to use their talents across a variety of situations.

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