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“Crème de la Project Manager”



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Many things go into making a great project manager but consistent project success comes from matching the PM's skills to the needs of each project

What makes a consistently successful project manager? Certainly there are personality traits, interpersonal skills, ability to communicate and knowledge of the right techniques to use in various project situations. Let's start by examining the ingredients many people use for "crème de la project manager." We'll also examine a few of the myths about these ingredients. Then we'll go on to examine how an organization's project management processes and the scope of the project affects the requirements for the project manager.

The Raw Ingredients and How They Evolved

Technical expertise – Expertise is the most ancient of the project manager ingredients. In the olden days many organizations thought that all a successful project manager required was strong technical expertise. After all, without consummate technical expertise how could a project manager command the respect of the team, plan a technically elegant solution or solve problems as the project progressed? Without superior technical knowledge how could a PM enforce high standards and avoid having the “wool” pulled over their eyes by wily team members?

Ability to Work with the User/Client - As project management evolved it soon became apparent that project managers also required the ability to sell, persuade and motivate stakeholders, users, clients and team members. As time passed this basic communication requirement evolved into the need for project managers who could "see" the project from the user's or client's perspective rather than concerning themselves only with the technology. The highest evolution of this ingredient is when we seek project managers who plan projects based on their impact on the sponsor's business and drive the effort to deliver business relevant outcomes.

Project Management Tools & Techniques – It also became apparent that there were specialized tools and techniques that a project manager needed to be successful. For tier #1 projects (small efforts within a department), this tool set consists of a planning

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template and software for creating Gantt charts. For tier #2 projects (cross-functional projects), the PM's tools must include higher level communications skills and software tools for modeling options and tracking performance. For tier #3 projects (strategic level projects), the tool set must again grow to include strategic planning skills and interpersonal skills for multiple stakeholder situations. These days, people realize that the best project managers have a big tool kit and the knowledge to pick the right tools for each project.

Ability to Motivate Project Team Members – Along with recognition of special project management tools came recognition that the "expert power" of the technical guru was not sufficient to build highly motivated project teams. PMs, particularly those borrowing people across functional lines, needed the ability to determine the right way to deal with each team member and the interpersonal skills to develop effective project team cultures. They also needed management skills in defining the "right" assignment for each team member and the skill to build commitment to estimates and deadlines.

Ability to Solve Problems - Organizations always want project managers who are good problem solvers, good fire fighters and that fits very neatly with the historic requirement that project managers be the technical guru and pull off heroic technical rescues. But these days executives value PMs who can perform well in risk management and avoid having any fires to put out.

So we've got a basic list of the requirements for successful PMs but there is no such thing as "one PM skill set fits all" and we need to think about the processes an organization needs to grow its own PMs.

Moving Up From Tier #1 Projects to Tier #2 and #3

It would be so nice if the skills and techniques that make PMs successful on small projects were an automatic springboard to success on larger efforts. But the reverse is often true. The techniques and styles that work well on a tier #1 project (limited scope within a functional unit) are usually a disaster when we try to move up to tier #2 & #3 projects that are cross functional or strategic efforts. Unfortunately, the ingredients for project success change as:

- The size of the team grows
- The project's scope spans functional or organizational boundaries and
- The project "reaches" for benefits that are less tactical and more strategic.

A PM's strong technical knowledge can carry small technical projects with 2-4 people to success because that personal knowledge and individual problem-solving ability lets the

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PM catch all the problems and fix them. But that same close, micromanaging style can't expand to cover a team of even 6, much less 12 or more. PMs need to elevate their technique and rid themselves of that delicious "I'll make all the decisions" approach as the scale of their project increases.

Running a project for the boss within a functional unit is straightforward. The whole team usually has a common boss and authority, priority and resource allocation issues are easily resolved. The boss also controls the scope whenever an issue arises. But when the team is drawn from across functional or organizational boundaries and the stakeholders multiply, superior PM techniques need to fill the gap.

The project management skills also change based on the business outcome the project aims to deliver. If we're enhancing an existing functionality or process, relatively little "strategic vision" is required from the PM. But as projects aim for improvements in operational performance or even strategic results, the PM must be able to see beyond the technology and drive the project toward those measured business outcomes.

The PM Alone Does Not Determine Project Results

The most superbly equipped PMs fail when the organization's growth and/or increasing density of projects make the organization's project environment a chaotic mess of over-allocated team members, more project work than people can do and priorities that change moment to moment. As organizations use projects more and more frequently without establishing organizational processes, the project failure rate climbs. Usually everyone points to the capabilities of project managers as the source of the problem.

Good PMs can cope with changing priorities and resource availability and with changes to scope. But the PMs cannot overcome issues which plague organizations like:

- Uncontrolled project initiation
- No prioritization of projects
- Absence of PM authority to manage borrowed team members.

First, we bring order to project initiation with portfolio management processes. Projects are treated as investments by the portfolio managers who evaluate their "yield" when determining priorities and allocating resources. We're no longer pretending that 98% of the projects can be priority #1 or that we can complete projects that require 350% of the resources that are available.

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Second, we become a matrix organization for projects. The intent is to grant PMs some authority to directly assign work and reward outstanding performance of people they borrow across functional lines.

Summary

The ideas in this article may be useful in considering the career progression for project managers and the skills they need to succeed with different types of projects. But there is also a point where the organization must evolve consistent PM processes and executive controls to achieve consistent success. For more information on these ideas, take a look at our one-on-one [individual web courses](#) and [group training programs](#).