



The Real Role of the Project Manager

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What is the role or function of a project manager?

Many project managers experience difficulty translating their skills from one industry to another, but they can also struggle when moving to other organisations in the same industry. Others do not. This article suggests that tacit, unstated roles may be a contributing factor, and that it is vital to match skills and attitude to the projects and cultural environment.

Traditional project management activities

Project management is traditionally associated with a number of activities throughout the project lifecycle, including:

- Feasibility studies.
- Planning.
- Defining scope.
- Risk management.
- Estimating.
- Budgeting.
- Scheduling.
- Resource planning.
- Work allocation.
- Procurement.
- Supply chain management.
- Documentation.
- Monitoring.
- Controlling.
- Reporting.
- Quality control.
- Financial management.
- Problem solving.

Unspoken roles

Looking at textbooks and job descriptions one may expect the 'traditional' activities to take up most of the project manager's time, and there was possibly a time when this was the case. Modern management practice however requires a leader to be attuned to the softer side of people, still excelling at technical activities whilst performing in a way that is compatible with the organisation's culture and practice. This culture can be subtle yet pervasive. There are the small things like dress, greetings and daily rituals, but there are also key functions and activities that are not taught in colleges and universities such as:

- Handyman:
 - Doing the jobs others do not want to do.
 - Completing filing, administrative and statutory tasks.
 - Organising computers, desks and seats.
 - Traffic control, communications and project office reporting.

- Agent:
 - Being the agent of organisation change, restructuring and retrenchment.
 - Enforcing new methodologies and practices.
 - Reigning in out-of-control teams.
 - Badgering and coercing uncooperative staff.
 - Enabling senior management to stay in control.
 - Facilitating unpopular but necessary changes in scope, schedule and budget.

- Firefighter:
 - Solving resource conflicts.
 - Juggling too many projects.
 - Pacifying conflicting personalities.
 - Managing the aftermath of poor planning and estimating.

- Gatekeeper and firewall:
 - Forming a barrier between the team and customers.
 - Forming a barrier between the team and business functions.
 - Dealing with stakeholders.
 - Shielding management from complexity and unpleasantness.
 - Extricating the organisation from legal or public relations situations.
 - Blocking changes in scope, schedule and priority.

- Driving force:
 - Kickstarting sleepy projects.
 - Ensuring the project maintains its momentum.
 - Making sure projects and team don't lose their way.
 - Ensuring sponsors maintain their support.

Matching project people to project culture

Project managers can struggle to adjust to a new organisation, team, project or new ways of doing things; particularly when they do not have the luxury of time to integrate into their environment. They may experience a mismatch between culture, expectations and approach, and find

themselves performing 'soft' functions they are not trained for or adept at. Eventually this can lead to project managers experiencing a range of feelings including:

- Low personal motivation.
- No sense of achievement.
- No control over outcomes.
- A sense of being lost.
- Feeling irrelevant, wasted, of not making a meaningful contribution.
- Not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.
- Frustration.
- Irritability.
- Avoiding situations that may involve conflict.
- Hiding in the office, buried in paperwork.
- Inappropriately delegating important duties to subordinates.
- The desire to find another job.

To prevent situations like these from occurring it is up to human resources and project directors to be aware of the unique characteristics of their organisation and recruit staff with the appropriate attitudes, abilities and even experience. Similarly, project managers need to understand their own aptitudes and expectations, and then ask the right questions during a job interview to establish compatibility.

Where project managers are already on the job, the way forward can involve a frank discussion, reassignment to other types of projects, and even a re-evaluation of how the organisation operates. Project managers themselves need to take heed of comments like *"we don't do it like that around here"*, reflect on what they are doing, analyse the situation and compare their behaviour compares to others and possibly have that frank discussion about expectations with fellow project managers and the project director.

Greater awareness of culture and tacit expectations along with careful selection and matching of temperaments will ensure that the project manager's approach and personality is not in conflict with those they work with. Organisations should be aware though that the unique style that individual project managers bring to an organisation and project can be of tremendous value.