Helping Executives Act For Project Success
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Abstract

Even the most progressive executives who are interested in supporting project managers by acting for project success often find that easier said than done. The demands of their executive responsibilities, the constraints they encounter both real and imagined, and their limited understanding of the discipline of project management hinder even the most enthusiastic among them.

This paper builds upon the author's work reflected in last year's *Getting Executives To Act For Project Success* publication (O'Brochta 2005); it shifts the perspective from the project manager's viewpoint, as was previously done, to that of the executive. It directly addresses the chasm growing between even better-educated and trained project managers and increasingly anxious mid-level managers and executives. It offers an optimistic assessment for the results achievable through meaningful partnerships between project managers and executives.

Included are specific techniques available to the executive to tune in to the needs of the project managers, to deal with genuine organizational and political obstacles, and to leverage the enormous pent-up motivation in the workforce to rally around and carry out strategic and cultural changes that will result in a sustained long-term increase in project performance and organizational maturity. Lessons learned from best practice organizational improvement assessment methodologies are examined. This paper draws on the experiences and opinions formed by the author as he has led the Agency-wide Professional Project Manager Certification program at the CIA, and it draws on the results of a survey of executives whose employees have recently participated in that program.

Introduction

The Problem

Executives need help. Many, if not most, do not know how to act for project success (Ireland, 2006). Even those executives who know how to act find that their circumstances and the pressures of their jobs contribute to the situation where **acting for project success can be difficult at best**. Project managers skilled in the best practices of their profession are asking for and requiring more from their executives. Executives are increasing aware that project managers can fall into the trap of applying best practice project management only to have the project fail because of their own executive inaction or counter action. Both executives and project managers are realizing that project success is dependent to an increased degree not only on the efforts of the project manager, but also on the efforts of the executive as well. Given these circumstances, the problem is figuring out **how executives can act for project success**.

The Context

This paper is for executives. It is being offered to executives who have responsibility for organizations that depend on projects and on project managers. It is being offered to those executives who are motivated to identify and overcome the barriers to acting for project success. It is being offered on behalf of the project management workforce who are increasingly better skilled at their chosen profession of managing projects and who are aware that their success is increasingly dependent on the executive. It is also being offered on behalf of those project managers who are increasingly frustrated by what they see as a lack of executive support and who wish to improve, if not, resolve the situation. This paper can serve as a **connection and communication between project managers and executives interested in how to act for project success**. In its simplest form, this communication can involve the handing of this paper by the project manager to the executive; in a more evocative form the handing-the-paper action can and should be followed by a series of ongoing discussions and actions.

This is a good news story. Much is known about the actions project managers need their executives to take for project success; the project manager's perspective is well understood (O'Brochta 2005). Executives are increasingly aware of these actions and are willing to incorporate them into their scope of executive responsibilities.

This paper draws from references and blends the wisdom from these sources with my experiences and opinions. As a senior project manager at the CIA, I am leading a program to mature the project management practices agency-wide; from this perspective I have been leading the development and operations of an internal Professional Project Manager Certification program that involves over a thousand project managers per year (O'Brochta 2003 and 2004). In this capacity I frequently encounter project management students who are returning to their workplace after learning an approach or technique in a training class that they are having difficulty applying because of something their executive is doing or not doing. In this capacity I frequently discuss with executives the barriers both real and imagined that they confront in acting for project success; these discussions have been supplemented by a survey and in-depth interviews with some of these executives (O'Brochta 2006). My observations of and interactions with these project managers and their executives serve as a basis for some of the views expressed in this paper. These views are solely my own; although the CIA has reviewed this material, that review neither constitutes authentication nor endorsement.

Executive Definition

For the purposes of acting for project success, the term **executive is being defined quite broadly**. An executive is defined as a person responsible for the administration of a business or department. This executive may be an individual, or it may be a function performed by more than one individual. On an organization chart the executive appears above other individuals and functions, including the project manager. An executive who is focused on the business operations and processes associated with the department in which the project resides would be a likely candidate to act for project success. The project sponsor also falls within this broad definition of an executive (Whitten 2002 & 2005, Englund 2006). Ideally, this executive is positioned close enough to the project work to be able to have a genuine impact.

Executive Actions

Success More Dependent On Executive

Executives now have a much larger role in project success. During the early days of project management, success was measured entirely in technical terms and achieving it was largely within the scope of the project manager's responsibility and ability. Today, the **definition of project success has expanded so greatly as to be almost unachievable by the project manager without the executive**. Today's project success definition extends beyond the bounds of the project to include customer satisfaction, impact to other projects in the organization or system, and impact to the organizational culture (Kerzner 1998, Archibald 2003, O'Brochta 2002).
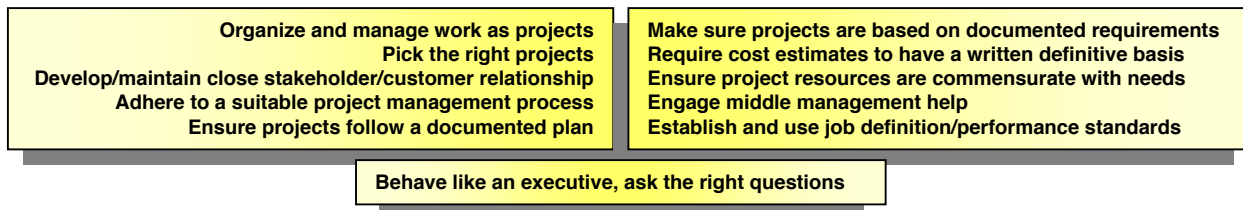
One highly public example of this expansion of the definition of project success has been the space program. In the early days scientists and engineers were trying to develop the basic capability to launch a manned rocket, a narrow technical success criterion. That accomplishment was followed by the historical challenge and expansion of the project success criteria by President John F. Kennedy to "land a man on the Moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the decade." By the time the Space Shuttle Program was underway, the success definition further expanded to include the customer, specifically to produce commercially profitable material in space. Recently, President George W. Bush took the success definition for the space program into the cultural realm when he articulated the goal to "extend human presence across our solar system…because doing so improves our lives, and lifts our national spirit."

Lifting our national spirit: now there is a broad definition of project success. How can a project manager deal with the fact that the definition of project success has expanded so greatly? How can a project manager succeed when project goals include organizational and cultural impact? How can a project manager perform successfully when such a substantial portion of the definition of project success extends beyond the traditional project boundaries? The simple answer is that the **project manager must depend on executive actions** for project success.

Executive Actions Needed

The actions executives need to take for project success are known (O'Brochta 2005, Jedd 2006). Project managers, Project Management Councils, and other sources have consistently identified the actions executives can take to create an environment for project success (Exhibit 1).

At the top of the list of executive actions are organizing the work into projects and then picking the right projects. Project managers can feel like fish out of water when they work in an environment that does not **organize and manage work as projects**. Much effort can be spent trying to convince and educate the myriad stakeholders about the merits of project basics, such as requirements definition, baselines, schedules, and configuration control. This unproductive and often frustrating time could be better spent if the department or section of the organization organized itself to be project based and if it were separated from the ongoing and repetitive operations. Project managers can easily drown when they have too many projects to work on. **Picking the right projects** can be as sophisticated as strategic portfolio management or as simple as doing only those projects for which the project managers and project teams have the capacity to do. I favor the simple approach: do only as many projects as can be done well; don't agonize over the decisions about which projects to do. Actual research into the optimum number of projects for a project manager to manage successfully is sparse; however, the few works that I have come across do coincide with empirical evidence. Fewer projects are better; fewer projects mean more time spent per project. Fewer projects mean that ultimately more projects conclude successfully. The optimum number of projects per project manager seems to range between three and eight; more results in a quantum decline in the project success rate.

Organize and manage work as projects **Pick the right projects** **Develop/maintain close stakeholder/customer relationship** **Adhere to a suitable project management process** **Ensure projects follow a documented plan**	**Make sure projects are based on documented requirements** **Require cost estimates to have a written definitive basis** **Ensure project resources are commensurate with needs** **Engage middle management help** **Establish and use job definition/performance standards**

Behave like an executive, ask the right questions

Exhibit 1 - Executive Actions

Executives have a unique responsibility to **develop and maintain close stakeholder and customer relationships** that complement and enhance the relationships formed by the project manager. The time invariably comes when an issue, concern, or decision needs to be addressed by someone other than the project manager. Project funding, priority, and requirements are often topics that benefit from this type of supportive intervention. Note that these executive relationships should be conducted so that the project manager's authority and responsibility are maintained and so that the project manager is kept in the loop and well informed. Ideally, it is the project manager who is serving up the topics for the executive to act on.

Project management is a discipline and as such benefits by **adhering to a suitable project management process**. Project managers who are at the top of their game have come to rely on executives to establish a standardized process for their organization to use. They seek to be held accountable for applying tailored versions of this process to each of their projects, and they rely on others to do the same. They can, in the absence of executive action, develop and follow their own processes, but they recognize the limits in efficiency and effectiveness of doing so.
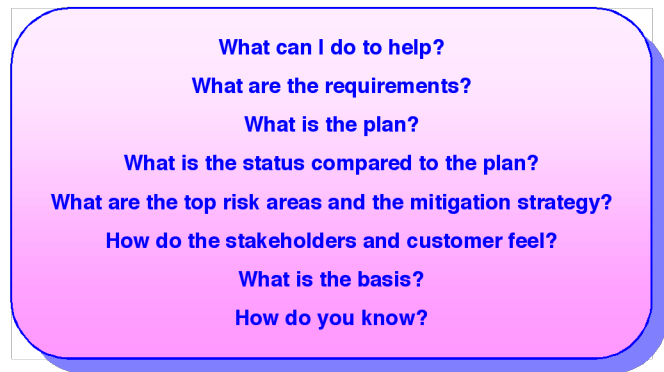
Project managers expect executives to ensure that they **follow a documented project plan** and to **ensure that projects are based on documented requirements**. They expect to be given adequate time up front during the initial project phase to build these baseline documents and to be isolated from pressure to proceed hastily without them; they also expect to be held accountable for continuous, controlled revisions to these documents through the project life cycle. To help with the understanding of these baseline documents, executives should **require cost estimates to have a written definitive basis**. In return for managing their projects according to plan, project managers look to their executives to **ensure that project resources (time, people, and money) are commensurate with needs**. If shortages and/or changes occur, the executive should expect to receive an impact assessment from the project manager that has been developed in an environment without excessive pressure to absorb the change or

simplistically, do more with less. This impact assessment, which could serve as the basis for plan revisions, will be formulated with respect to the plans, requirements, and other documents that have been baselined.

Actions by the executive need to be taken to **engage middle management help** and to **establish and use job definitions and performance standards**. By holding middle managers responsible for supporting project managers and by insuring that career progression and growth is aligned with best practice project management executives will create long lasting and sustainable project-based cultures. They can demonstrate their commitment to this culture by **behaving like an executive and asking the right questions** of their project managers. They can acknowledge that their role as executives is enhanced when they behave like a servant leader in a role supportive of the project manager. In this culture they will attract, retain and grow project management excellence.

Executive Questions

Here is a list that is an absolute favorite of the executives with whom I consult (Exhibit 2). One executive whom I have known for years and have worked with recently has actually had this list reduced in size and laminated; he wears it around his neck attached behind his employee badge, and he glances casually at it when he finds himself in a meeting with project managers. This list helps him to behave like an executive and ask the right questions. It helps minimize the traditional distractions of getting into the project details, of solving the project issues, or of doing the project managers jobs for them. The list is my own; like the list of executive actions, it has evolved over time. At this point it has become stable; I do

What can I do to help?

What are the requirements?

What is the plan?

What is the status compared to the plan?

What are the top risk areas and the mitigation strategy?

How do the stakeholders and customer feel?

What is the basis?

How do you know?

Exhibit 2 - Executive Questions

occasionally add or subtract from it. It is also a tool that should be used with caution. It is offered as a starting point for executives who are looking to **quickly and effectively begin behaving** in a way that demonstrates their support for project managers. At the top of the list is the extraordinarily effective question for the executive to ask, **"What can I do to help?"** This supportive approach to management has been effective and increasingly popular since "servant leadership" came into use to describe the executive's role (Greenleaf 2002) and continues to be regarded by the *Harvard Business Review* and others as the basis for "leaders should be led by the group's needs" modern management theory (Useem 2006).
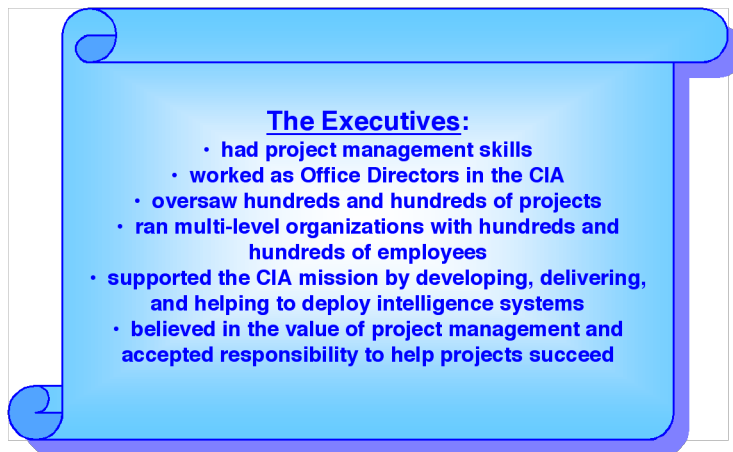
Barriers To Executive Action

The executive's work life differs from that of the project manager (Archibald 2003). Whereas project managers tend to view project management quite personally, often with little or no distinction between their performance and the performance of the project, **executives tend to see project management as a means to an end**, as a good way of motivating people toward achievement of specific objectives, as a source of future executives, and a means to achieve strategic objectives. The executive environment comes complete with its own issues, barriers, and frustrations. Some executives lament that despite investing in raising the level of project manager competence, projects themselves still seem to take too long, cost too much, and produce less than the desired results (Englund 2006). Even the executive who is fully committed to acting for project success must **confront the realities of executive and organizational life**. The consequence of these realities is often a set of limitations and/or barriers challenging even the most motivated executive. These barriers can be generally grouped into two categories: those that are linked to the organization and those that are linked to the people in the organization.

Organizations are organic; they have attributes and may even be considered to have personalities. Organizational behavior and social science come into play. **Organizations impose limitations on what can be done by the executive.** We can turn to the body of work that addresses project management maturity for an understanding of the limits in what actions an organization can succeed at taking (Ibbs 1997, Kerzner 2001, Crawford 2002). This work teaches us that the lower maturity organizations are characterized by ad-hoc activity with little or no formal project procedures; individual heroics that occasionally result in success are rewarded. In

contrast, formal, well-defined, and repeatable processes that are undergoing continuous improvement characterize high maturity organizations; success is intentional and can more easily be replicated. For example, if we are in the typical lower level maturity organization, it would not only be inappropriate but also counterproductive if the executive attempted to install an enterprise-wide project management information system just so a project manager could have easy access to financial data for a single project. Instead, the executive would be better served by tasking the finance department to extract from the data they already have and deliver it consistent with a specified project template. The executive actions must **conform to the maturity of the organization**. In addition, organizations can only change when the timing is right, and even then, the pace of change is limited. Organizations and individuals are at varying levels of change readiness. It does little good to push for a change if the individuals and/or the organization is not ready; in fact, it is counterproductive and "sours the well water" for future attempts at similar changes. High readiness levels are characterized by strong desires for change and readiness for it; a strong resistance to change characterizes low readiness levels. Moderate readiness levels are characterized by a desire for change but a lack of readiness. For example, if there were a merger yesterday, and if today there were a reorganization, then tomorrow would not be a good time for an executive to try to implement a substantial change to the standard corporate product development lifecycle. A more appropriate executive action would be to grant approval for a single project to tailor the standard lifecycle in a way that benefits the project but does not broadly impact other projects and processes in the organization. The executive actions must **conform to the change readiness level of the organization**.

The Executives:
· had project management skills
· worked as Office Directors in the CIA
· oversaw hundreds and hundreds of projects
· ran multi-level organizations with hundreds and hundreds of employees
· supported the CIA mission by developing, delivering, and helping to deploy intelligence systems
· believed in the value of project management and accepted responsibility to help projects succeed

Exhibit 3 - About The Executives

People, after all, are at the center of the executive's work life. And in organizations, where there are people, there is politics (Pinto 1996). And **politics was at the top of the list** of executives surveyed (Exhibit 3) and interviewed recently at the CIA (O'Brochta 2006). Politics was identified as a leading source for conflicting demands on the executive, as the source for project scope creep, as a source of shifting of focus for project goals, and as a cause for fluctuations in staffing and financial resources. Short-term bottom-line demands were frequently cited as taking priority over longer-term strategic goals such as acting for project success. The "just get it done" mentality that can pervade o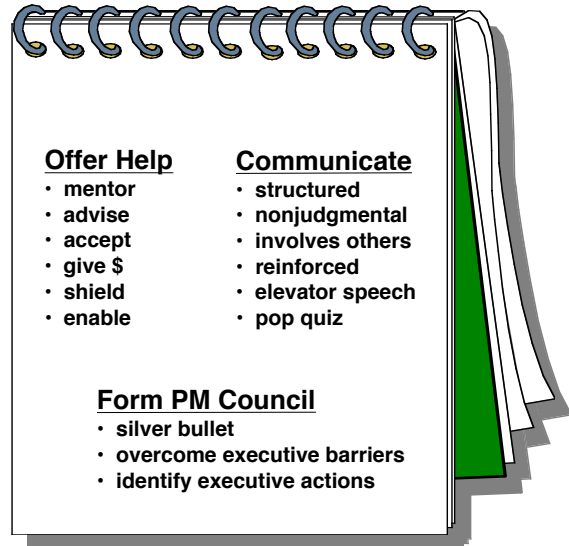ther aspects of an organization can also dominate the executive's life. When executives were asked why they did not take more actions for project success, they invariably wove the topic of politics into their answer. They also wove in the fact that they have **limitations in authority** that prevent or at least make difficult acting for project success. For example, in some functional organizations, executives with responsibility for project portfolios and programs do not have commensurate authority over resources. Some executives report that they do not even have authority over decisions about which projects get assigned to or removed from their organization. Other people related barriers frequently offered by executives are trust and openness. Executives described these as attributes in relationships with project managers that were elusive. The gap in positional authority, the drive for accountability, the "don't want to hear bad news" symptom, were all offered as partial explanations for the difficulties in establishing and maintaining trust. Yet, given the typical executive's dilemma of being overwhelmed with information while simultaneously feeling under informed (Archibald 2003), **trust and openness represent the keys** to providing the executive with crisp, concise, and accurate project information.

How To Act

Offer Help

Executives who have worked hard and risen through the ranks have likely already learned various approaches for succeeding in an organizational environment. When adapted, those approaches can serve executives well when they find themselves in a project-based environment working with project managers and looking to take actions for project success.

For those who have learned to rely on the effectiveness of the "servant leadership" approach to maximizing employee performance (Greeleaf 2002, Buckingham 1999), then it should not be a surprise to learn that the leading approach used by the executives interviewed at the CIA is to **offer help** (O'Brochta 2006). The "what can I do to help" attitude was prevalent. Leading authors in the field of project management have woven the importance of executive support, sponsorship, and partnership into their recommendations (Englund 1997, Crawford 2006). The research about this topic explains why; study after study cites lack of executive support or involvement as a top reason that projects run into trouble (Standish 2001). Given the dichotomy between the project manager's enormous amount of responsibility and his limited authority, it is no wonder why offering help is a particularly powerful action for an executive to take. The remarkable aspect of this helpful approach is that it not only works as an entry point into the discussions about what actions can be done to help project managers, but it is also **equally effective at overcoming the barriers** executives face in taking these actions. Executives use this approach to address many of the identified barriers; in group settings it defuses some of the politics and in one-on-one situations it serves to establish and build trust.

Offer Help
- mentor
- advise
- accept
- give $
- shield
- enable

Communicate
- structured
- nonjudgmental
- involves others
- reinforced
- elevator speech
- pop quiz

Form PM Council
- silver bullet
- overcome executive barriers
- identify executive actions

**Exhibit 4 - Overcoming Executive Barriers**

Mentoring project managers is a form of help. Offering **advice** to mid-level managers is a form of help. Responding positively to the messenger delivering bad news and **accepting the message** is a form of help. **Setting aside** and using financial and/or staff resources to address troubled projects is a form of help. **Shielding** projects, project managers, and project teams from politics are forms of help, as is teaching them to deal better with politics themselves. Creating an environment where project managers feel **comfortable making decisions** and being held accountable for the consequences is a form of help. All of these forms of help, management techniques in reality, are being used successfully to overcome executive barriers.

Communicate

Communicate early and often; and do it with many constituents and stakeholders. The benefit of integrating **effective communications** into the set of executive responsibilities is another leading approach for overcoming barriers. This action works well in many environments, and is particularly effective in the project environment where such a tremendous variety of stakeholders exist. Once again we can turn to authors who have provided pivotal insight into what makes executives successful; in this case we can see that those who have learned to view themselves as "flawless consultants" see their role more as facilitators and coaches rather than commanders (Block 2000). In this role they establish and maintain authentic relationships based on communicating with clients. The clients include project managers, mid-level managers, customers, sponsors, and even competitors (Kerzner 1998). By using the consultant-client model to drive their communications, executives reinforce their value as helpers and overcome barriers to acting for project success.

The communication is **structured**, meaning that it follows a well thought out plan. The communication is **nonjudgmental**, meaning that it draws out and provides information without being critical. The communication is a

way of **involving others** in the dialogue; mid-level managers help set strategic goals, project managers help set schedules, customers set priorities, and master PMs work with apprentices. The communication is **reinforced by action**, meaning that when issues arise the executive works to resolve those issues at the top of the list. Two effective communications techniques that are sensitive to the constraints of limited time in the executive's work life are the "elevator speech" and the "pop quiz." Both techniques accelerate building and maintaining trusting relationships. The **elevator speech** (named after the concept of delivering a short and powerful message to a co-rider in the time it takes an elevator to reach the selected floor) requires the executive to distill the message into only it's most important ingredients and then transmit them succinctly. The **pop quiz** (named after the grade school practice of quickly soliciting a couple of answers indicative of the level of understanding of the responder) allows the executive to cut to the heart of an unknown issue or, if he already knows the answer, to reinforce the message with the responder (Exhibit 5).

Only one reason for asking a question is because you do not know the answer.
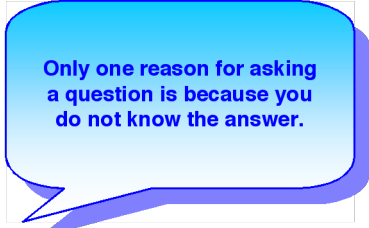
Exhibit 5 - Pop Quiz

Project Management Council

And now for the "silver bullet" approach that can work in virtually all situations, with differing viewpoints, with differing levels of project management ability, with various business contexts, across organizational maturity barriers, and across change readiness levels. It is effective at identifying and overcoming many of the barriers confronting executives who wish to act for project success. The approach is to **form a Project Management Council**. It can be the key to identifying the actions for the executive to take for project success. It can accelerate the executive's ability to act for project success, and it can amplify the power of the project manager to get executives to act for project success. It is my favorite approach (Exhibit 6). I have used it often and so have many others (Crawford 2002, Rad 2002, Englund 2003, Bolles 2002, Dai 2002, Bridges 2000). Referred to variously as a project support office, project management working group, project management office, strategic project office,

PM Council

Exhibit 6 - Silver Bullet

project management center of excellence, and project management community of practice, these are organizations formed explicitly for the purpose of focusing on how project management is/can/should be practiced within the organization. My ideal project management council is comprised entirely of motivated project managers who have volunteered for the assignment. They are experienced, visionary change agents. As thought leaders they know how project management is done and how it should be done. They care deeply about their chosen profession and are concerned with the well being of other project managers.

A project management council can and should serve as a link between project managers and executives. Sizing it to no more than about a dozen people, having it chaired and/or sanctioned by an executive, and limiting its authority will help it gain recognition for the good it can do and help it counter many of the stereotypical negatives associated with groups of this type that exist outside the formal organization chart. Having it focus broadly on the entire organizational system as it relates to projects and project management raises its bona fides. Having it make recommendations to executives and provide help with implementing the executive actions positions it to have enduring value. Precluding it from control over decisions and resources minimizes the possibility that it will be viewed as a threat to established organizational decision-making mechanisms. Limiting the term of its members to a year or possibly two will insure a constant flow of fresh perspectives and ideas. Chartering the project management council to identify the barriers to project success, to make recommendations to overcome these barriers, and then to give it the latitude to explore the paths that follow will invigorate its members as well as the organization.

Now Go Do It

Progress Is Incremental And Cumulative

Victory, when it comes to executives acting for project success, is incremental and cumulative. It does not come all at once, and it does not occur in all elements or all executives of the organization at the same pace. Since by definition we are dealing with behavior and change, we must recognize that we are dealing with what is usually a

slow evolution rather than a sudden revolution. Executives and organizations have spent years becoming who they are. The good news is that the cumulative effects of modestly-paced, genuine change by an executive and in an organization are enduring. Executive action visible to project managers in-and-of-itself can stimulate meaningful change. The executive who understands the changing definition of project success and who understands the critical, dependent relationship necessary with the project manager has joined the evolution. The executive who looks to project managers to tailor the actions for them to take has moved the evolution forward. The executive who offers help, communicates, and forms a Project Management Council has accomplished a successful evolution not only for themselves but also for the organization and project managers as well.

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