

Measuring Executive Support For Projects

Michael O'Brochta, PMP
President, Zozer Inc.

Abstract

Even world-class project managers will not succeed unless they get their executives to act for project success. The trap of applying best practice project management only to have the project fail because of executive inaction or counteraction can be avoided. A model has been developed that can be used by project managers to measure the level of executive support for projects; this model identifies actions the project manager can take to accelerate executive support to the next level. A central theme is that project managers are empowered to extend their sphere of influence beyond the immediate project boundaries up into the organization to get their executives to act.

Executive Actions

The Problem

Project managers are falling into the trap of applying best-practice project management **only to have the project fail because of executive inaction or counteraction**. Project managers who continue doing what used to work by focusing within the bounds of the project are now finding success more difficult to achieve. The problem is 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**. This explains why three-quarters of the employees surveyed (Towers 2008) in a large global study "said that their organizations or senior management don't do enough to help them fully engage and contribute to their companies' success." And it explains why when U.S. federal government program managers were asked about executive support, 80% responded that they were not getting what they needed (COE 2008). We can see these compelling statistics evidenced through the collective experiences of the thousands of project managers whose

George, a project manager who is trying to apply some recently acquired knowledge, related how frustrated he was after learning about the best practice technique of writing a project charter. He spoke enthusiastically about how such a document could help him establish and maintain his authority - an aspect of his job he was consistently having trouble with. Then he lamented that he could never use such a document because the part of the organization he worked in had not and surely would not adopt such a technique.

Surveys and research suggest that there are many frustrated "Georges." PM's who think that they know what needs to be done but do not think that they can do it. PM's who try what may have worked in the past only to find it now doesn't. PM's who feel that they lack authority or power to overcome the "system." PM's who look at their executives as contributors to the problem. PM's who don't realize that the definition of project success has expanded. PM's who need their executives to take actions for project success.

reaction to useful information from a class or conference includes some form of “I wish my boss could have learned this.” The problem is understanding how to get executives to act for project success.

Executive Actions

The good news associated with the topic of accelerating executive actions for project success is that experienced project managers and authors have been articulating the **actions that they would like executives to take**. These lists of executive actions for project success frequently include some for of the following: organize and manage work as projects, pick the right projects, ensure projects are based on documented requirements and follow a documented plan, provide adequate resources, and behave like a servant leader by supporting the needs of the project manager. A complete list of these actions, an analysis of the barriers to action and how to overcome them, and a listing of related references can be found in a paper by the author (O’Brochta 2008). By all means, examine the list that I have prepared, examine the referenced publications, and **make a list for yourself** of the actions that you would like your executive to take that will help your project succeed.

Executive Barriers

Regardless of the quality of the list of actions for executives to take for project success, the reality is that **there are limitations associated with getting the executive to actually take those actions**. Even the most progressive executives who are interested in supporting project managers by acting for project success often find that goal 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. It is essential for project managers who want to get their executives to act for project success to understand the barriers that their executives face. Only after gaining this insight can a project manager understand how effectively to get their executive to take the actions necessary for project success.

Measurement Model

Measurement Concept

Scales to measure various aspects of management, organizational, and individual behavior have repeatedly proven their worth (Brown 2003). Typically, these scales present a simplified model of the situation that is represented by two or three dimensions, the model’s characteristics are explained, and guidance is given for how the model can be used to guide action. Over time, evaluations of the model’s performance validate its accuracy. A search of the available literature has revealed hundreds of management-related models.

Example Models

A few of the measurement models that have stood the test of time can be useful in the context of gauging the executive support for projects. The Managerial Grid model (Blake 1964) forms the basis for much of the accepted management theory today; this model is represented as a grid with an individual's concern for production as the X-axis and concern for people as the Y-axis. The Transactional vs. Transformational leadership model (Bass 1985) identifies four dimensions associated with changing the surrounding organizational environment to support the needs of the work. The Strength Deployment Inventory model (Porter 1971) is focused on an individual's motivation and related behavior set in the context of relationships under two conditions: when things are going well and when faced with conflict.

As useful as the classic management models may be, none of them actually offers a scale to measure the levels of executive support for projects. The Managerial Grid can readily guide the project manager's approach to interacting with an executive who may be more or less production or people oriented. Similarly, the Transactional vs. Transformational scale and the Strength Deployment Inventory can spotlight the style that is likely to resonate when dealing with a particular executive. However, as useful as these models and scales may be for addressing management style or attitude, they do relatively little to address executive ability or aptitude. Even executives who are highly motivated to act for project success may not know how or may not be able to act; they need to also have the ability to act for project success. Accelerating executive support for projects involves a dependent relationship with executives who have both the attitude and ability to act for project success.

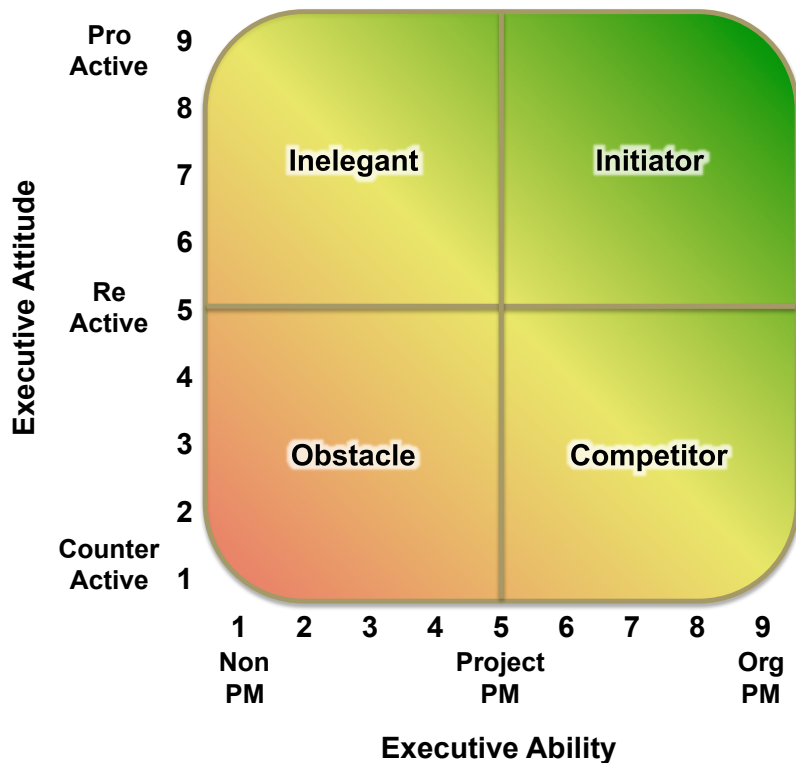
Executive Support For Projects Model

A new two-dimensional model has been developed by the author and is being offered to gauge the level of executive support for projects. This model includes scales for **accessing the attitude of the executive as well as the ability of the executive**. The model's scales are defined, the characteristics of each of the model's four quadrants are explained, and guidance is given for how the model can be used to guide action. The Executive Support For Projects Model is intended to be used as an aid in assessing and diagnosing the organizational environment in which the project manager and executive reside. Armed with a level of understanding about the nature of an executive's support for projects, the project manager is more likely to be able to find an effective approach to help the executive take the actions for project success. Note that the model represents the observable behavior of the executive and can be used to assist with determining the underlying reasons for the behavior.

The Executive Attitude axis is presented as a continuum that represents the **attitude of the executive toward taking actions for project success**. At the high end of the scale, executives are characterized as proactive; taking initiative to identify and act on opportunities that they see as supportive of project success. The midpoint on the scale pertains to executives who are reactive, those who take supportive action in response to a stimulus from the situation or project manager. The low end of the scale represents behavior that is counter to the goal of acting for project success; actions taken at this end of the scale reduce the likelihood of project success.

The Executive Ability axis is offered as a continuous range representing the project management related ability of the executive. At the high end of the scale, executives are characterized as being adept at not only the management of projects but also at the management of the organization in which the project resides; organizational change is a skill possessed by these executives. The midpoint on the scale pertains to executives who have a full set of skills to manage within the bounds of a defined project, but who are not equipped to impact the organizational environment in which the project is located.

The low end of the scale represents executives who, although they may possess a significant range of skills, are not able to manage projects or impact the project environment.



By using the Executive Support For Projects Model, the project manager can gauge both the executive's attitude and ability. Taken together, these two dimensions can serve as the basis of understanding needed to allow the project manager to help the executive overcome the barriers and accelerate support for project success. The resulting executive support for projects behaviors are as follows:

- **Initiator Behavior:** Proactive attitude and organizational project management ability. Concern for taking actions for project success. Thorough knowledge of the management of projects within the organizational context. High motivation to use foresight to identify upcoming opportunities. Project manager can benefit by using full and open communications with the executive to insure that actions for project success are synchronized.
- **Inelegant Behavior:** Proactive attitude and non-project management ability. Concern for taking action for project success, but without the benefit of needed understanding about project management. Likelihood of well-intentioned actions being taken that are less than effective. Project manager can benefit from taking the lead to identify the actions for the executive to take and by helping the executive take these actions.
- **Competitor Behavior:** Counteractive attitude and organizational project management ability. Concern for agendas counter to project success. Thorough knowledge of the management of projects within the organizational context. Likelihood of subjugating project management to achieve competing agenda. Project manager can benefit from

keeping well informed of the executive actions and by looking for common ground to reduce the level of competition.

- **Obstacle Behavior:** Counteractive attitude and non-project management ability. Concern for agendas counter to project success but without the benefit of needed understanding about project management. Likelihood of somewhat random and unpredictable behavior that may or may not impact project success. Project manager can benefit from some insulation from and resilience to the executive, from an alliance with a more supportive executive, and from efforts to raise the project management knowledge level of the executive.

Conclusion

Progress Is Incremental And Cumulative

Project managers who would like to get their executives to take actions for project success would be well served to step back and gauge the level of executive support. With this understanding, the project manager can identify the executive behavior and then formulate approaches to be taken to help accelerate their executive to take the needed actions.

Victory, when it comes to getting executives to act 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 in an executive and in an organization is enduring. The project manager who understands the critical dependent relationship necessary with the executive has joined the evolution.

George, as project manager who is working to get his executive to act for project success, has been studying his executive and studying the Executive Support For Projects Model. He has decided that his executive falls within the Obstacle quadrant as someone who knows little about project management and whose actions are counter to George's goal of boosting authority with a project charter.

George begins working with his executive to educate him about some project management basics so that his executive can appreciate the need George has to demonstrate authority. Over time, as the executive appreciation about project management increases, so does his interest and ability to support George. Over time, the behavior of George's executive moves more toward the center of the Executive Ability and Executive Support scales of the Executive Support For Projects Model.

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