

Federal Project Manager Momentum
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Introduction

For most project managers career success and project success are highly correlated. "If my project succeeds then I will succeed" has been a common career approach for decades. Russell Archibald identified this reality in 1976 in his book "Managing High-Technology Programs and Projects" and events during the past three decades have continued to demonstrate this truth. Project managers looking for success will gravitate toward organizations that provide more opportunities for project success.

This was recognized within the US Federal Government a few years ago when the Services Acquisition Reform Act of 2003 expanded the definition of acquisition to for the first time officially include project managers. More recognition occurred in 2007 when the Office of Management and Budget enacted the Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM) that established training and experience requirements for this field in civilian agencies. Now, larger portions of the federal civilian workforce are focused on maturing their project management skills and experience, which in turn is propelling them toward career success. However, retaining these higher skilled project managers comes with challenges.

Keeping Talent

Here we are likely seeing an effect of the law of unintended consequences. Thanks to organizations like the Project Management Institute and the plethora of high quality project management training providers the workforce now has far more and better-educated project managers. The FAC-P/PM will add to this talent pool. These project managers are now much more knowledgeable about best practices and much more knowledgeable about the kind of supportive work environment they need to achieve success. These project managers are quite capable of identifying the executive actions needed for project success. An unintended consequence occurs when these more knowledgeable project managers identify the gap between what they need from their organizations to succeed and what they are getting. These project managers are far more likely to "vote with their feet" by moving to where their is a more supportive environment; either elsewhere within their own organizations or to other organizations. Unfortunately, it seems that a majority of organizations still don't get it. According to the December 2008 "Improving Government Performance and Delivery" report by The Council for Excellence In Government in cooperation with the Office of Management and Budget approximately 80% of the Federal program managers surveyed reported that they receive little support from their executives. I saw much the same situation within the Central Intelligence Agency when I built and ran their project management training and certification program. There we had thousands of employees per year returning to their jobs with measurably better project management skill-sets who reported back that they were frustrated by an unsupportive environment.

Keeping talented project managers requires first and foremost - a supportive work environment. In 1977 Robert Greenleaf wrote the book titled "Servant Leadership" which for many represented the start of a powerful management movement. This movement is centered on the concept of creating an environment supportive of the employee; in this environment the first question asked by executive management is "what can I do to help?" This powerful approach has been repeatedly shown over the past quarter century to be responsible for driving project management based organizations as well as others to higher levels of maturity and success. Indeed, a close look at how organizational maturity has become defined by PMI and others reveals that an environment that is supportive of and adaptive to the project managers needs tops the scale.

Approaches for enacting the "what can I do to help" type of supportive project environment are well understood; practitioners and thought leaders have been writing about this for several years. The "How To Get Executives To Act For Project Success" paper published in the PMI 2008 North America Global Congress proceedings advocates the formation of a Project Management Council where a handful of dedicated and visionary project managers from within the organization focus on identifying the executive actions for project success and then help carry out those actions. This approach can be effective in numerous forms and at multiple levels within an organization. For example, when a group of project management thought leaders that I was privileged to join, including some industry giants, met in December 2008 in Washington DC to discuss this very topic at the Federal level they produced their own list of executive actions titled "The 2009 Project Manifesto" for re-building America; it advocates the broad use of project management and it advocates the creation of a federal project management career path. That gathering was reported and described on December 23, 2008 by PMForum.org. This manifesto is but one of the significant movements pointing in the same direction; The Council for Excellence In Government and the PMI Government Relations Office are also advocating for movement in this direction.

Conclusion

Federal civilian project managers looking for career advancement commensurate with project success have reasons to feel encouraged. Serious attention is being paid to equipping them with more project management skills and for linking their occupational progression with how well they apply those skills.