Program Management Standard Comes To Aid Of Middle Managers

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Abstract

Help has finally arrived. The hurdle of getting middle managers to act for project success has just been lowered with the release of *The Standard For Program Management*. The project manager who has discovered his growing dependence on middle managers now has an increased level of confidence in achieving project success.

This paper builds upon the author's recent work reflected in the *Getting Executives To Act For Project Success* and *Helping Executives To Act For Project Success* publications; it shifts the emphasis to the middle management layer, and it dovetails program management information newly released by PMI® with newly released research study results by PMI® about the practices, roles, and responsibilities of middle managers. It offers an optimistic assessment for the results achievable through meaningful partnerships between project managers and middle managers.

Included are specific techniques extracted from *The Standard For Program Management* and elsewhere that are available for middle managers to use to deal with genuine obstacles confronting even the most excellent of project managers. Methods are included 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.

Introduction

The Problem

Middle managers need help. Project success depends on them. Project managers depend on them. Executive managers depend on them. Middle managers are in the middle - more so now than in the past, and they are increasingly unequipped to deal successfully with their situation. When the project manager's viewpoint is taken, the situation reveals an increased dependence on and frustration with middle managers. When the viewpoint is shifted to that of the middle manager, the perspective changes to one of being torn and isolated (Exhibit 1). The unpleasant result of this problem is frequently failed projects, disgruntled project managers, burned-out middle managers, and organizational systems in much need of attention. This chasm is likely to grow unless project managers and middle managers address the situation (Oshry 1996).
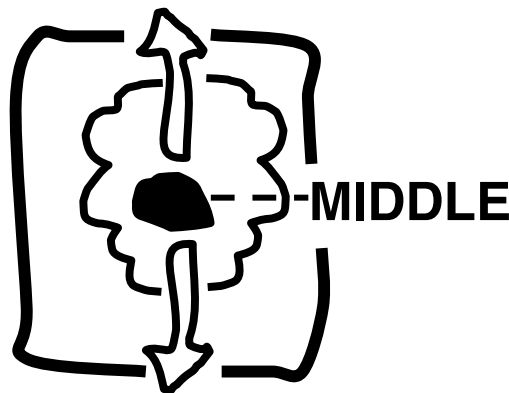

Exhibit 1 - Torn Middle Management Problem

One classic example of this problem can occur in organizations that engage in taking steps to institute a formal project reporting and control system. Executives, typically responding to customer concerns that not enough projects are being successfully completed, mandate creation and use of a periodic project reporting and control system. Dutifully, project managers begin using mandated reporting templates. Almost immediately, executives find that the information they are receiving is not adequate for their needs and that project success is not dramatically improving. Likewise, project managers find that the templates they are using make it difficult for them to elevate the information and issues they deem important. Both the executives and the project managers turn to the middle managers to fix the situation, a situation the middle managers did not create and one that adds to the long list of responsibilities with which they are already overburdened. Middle managers are caught in the middle. The problem is determining what to do about it.

Why Is This Happening?

Today, the **definition of project success has expanded so greatly as to be almost unachievable by the project manager without help**. 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 get help for project success (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2 - Causes of Problem

Today, **project managers have raised expectations**. As a class of people project managers today are better educated and possess more knowledge and skills than in the past (CBP 2003). Thanks to organizations like the Project Management Institute, the myriad of high quality training providers, and the large amount of project management publications, project managers are quite likely to know what needs to be done to achieve project success, and they are likely to know how to do it. Not only does this knowledge equip project managers to know what it is they need to do to succeed, but it also equips them to know what others need to do to help them succeed. Project managers recognize the dependence they have on middle managers, and project managers are increasingly interested in holding middle managers accountable for acting for project success.

Given the rise in the use of program management and portfolio management, **middle managers are finding themselves increasingly responsible for elements essential** for project success (Blomquist 2006). Both of these management approaches define new and expanded roles and responsibilities for middle managers. Similarly, the popularity of the matrix structure in project-based organizations also increases the importance of the middle manager; they are the critical interface between the project manager and the organization, and they are positioned to realize one of the basis matrix strengths of decentralized control (Sy 2006).

The Context

This paper is for both middle managers and project managers. It is being offered to middle managers who have responsibility for organizations that depend on projects and on project managers. It is being offered to project managers who are increasingly better skilled at their chosen profession of managing projects and who are aware that their success is increasingly dependent on management help. It is also being offered on behalf of those project managers who are increasingly frustrated by what they see as a lack of management support and who wish to

improve, if not, resolve the situation. For middle managers and project managers who are motivated to identify and overcome the barriers to acting for project success, this paper can serve as a **connection and communication between project managers and middle managers interested in how to act for project success**.

This is a good news story. Much is known about creating an environment for project success (Englund 1997, Heerkens 2000), and much is also known about the role of executives in project success (O'Brochta 2005). And now with newly released information from PMI® about program management (PMI 2006) and about middle management's role in managing programs (Blomquist 2006), we can more clearly see a path to take in addressing the problem. We now have insight into what middle managers and project managers can do to raise the odds of project success, and we can identify approaches they can use to act for project success.

Middle Manager Definition

For the purposes of acting for project success, the term **middle manager is being defined quite broadly**. It includes the management personnel intermediate between supervisors and policy-makers. It includes department managers, division managers, and other managers who are focused on translating organizational strategy into action and results. For the general case where organizations are being seen as systems, we have the benefit of knowing that when dealing with middles, we are dealing with people living in a world where they are pulled between project managers and others (Oshry 1996). This is a world where what project managers want from them, they don't have, and they need to go to others to get it. It is also a world where what others want from them, they need to come to project managers to get. We also have learned that other individuals in an organization from time to time behave as a middle; certain circumstances and topics spur individuals to step outside of their positions on the organization chart and take on characteristics of middles. Now, for the specific case of middles who are involved in project-based organizations, we have come to understand that **middles tend to see project management in a fairly negative light** (Archibald 2003). For them, project management is a dangerous threat to their established authority and organizational domain, it is a cause of unwanted change in ongoing procedures and the status quo, and it is evidence of implied deficiencies or failures in the traditional organization and functional managers. On an organization chart the middle manager appears slightly above other individuals and functions, including the project manager. Ideally, the middle manager is positioned close enough to the project work to have a genuine impact.

What To Do

Use Program Management

A key for middle managers to use to unlock the door to project success is to **understand and use program management**. This approach to management has tremendous overlap with what many, if not most, middle managers find themselves dealing with in their jobs. Program management represents a narrowed aspect of the broad topic of management targeted specifically on the project environment. The definition of a program as *a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing them individually* is remarkably similar to what middle managers do in a project-based organization (PMI 2004). Programs deliver benefits and capabilities that the organization can utilize to sustain, enhance, and deliver organizational goals. With the publication of the first-ever *The Standard For Program Management* (PMI 2006), middle managers and project managers have a wealth of information that they can use.

According to *The Standard For Program Management*, projects may be linked and managed in various ways. These linkages include the interdependencies of tasks among projects, the resource constraints, the risk mitigation, the changes in organizational direction, and the escalation point for issues. The big themes in program management are centered on benefits management, program stakeholder management, and program governance (Ross 2006).

Benefits Management - Program benefits management assesses the value and organizational impact of the program, identifies the interdependencies of benefits being delivered among various projects within the program, ensures that targeted benefits are realistic, analyzes the potential impact of planned program changes on benefits

outcome, and assigns responsibilities and accountability for the actual benefits realization resulting from the program.

Stakeholder Management - Program stakeholder management identifies how the program will affect stakeholders (the organization's culture, current major issues, resistance or barriers to change) and then develops a communication strategy to engage the affected stakeholders, manage their expectations, and improve their acceptance of the objectives of the program. Program stakeholder management extends beyond project stakeholder management to consider additional levels of stakeholders and broader interdependencies among projects.

Program Governance - Program governance is concerned with providing control of the organization's investment as well as monitoring the delivery of benefits as the program progresses. This control is achieved via monitoring progress reports and reviews at each of the different phases in the program's life cycle. These reviews are an opportunity for senior management or their representatives to assess the performance of the program before allowing the program to move to the next phase or before the initiation of another project.

Act On The Research

Handle Issues
Review Projects
Steering Groups
Get Resources
ID Bad Projects

Exhibit 3 - Middle Manager Role

Another key for middle managers to use to unlock the door to project success is to **understand and act on the research about middle managers'** roles and responsibilities in program management. Thanks to a PMI® sponsored study, we now have hard evidence about what middle managers do to raise the odds of project success (Blomquist 2006). This quantitative study, which included responses from several hundred professionals involved in the IT, engineering, and services industries, spotlights activities that middle managers devote more time to in high-performing organizations. The big roles for middle managers centered on the handling of project-related issues, review of projects, work in steering groups, procurement of resources, and identification of bad projects (Exhibit 3).

Handling Of Project-Related Issues – This was found to be the role that most distinguished high-performing organizations from the low-performing ones. Here middle managers engage in the identification of possible resources for problem solution. Issue handling can also comprise the removal of organizational obstacles. A correlation was found between the level of middle manager engagement in the issues and project success. The "what can I do to help" attitude is prevalent among managers who have learned to rely on the effectiveness of the "servant leadership" approach to maximizing employee performance (Greenleaf 2002, Buckingham 1999). 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 management 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 a middle manager to take.

Review Of Projects – Middle managers often initiate project and program reviews to assess performance and develop corrective actions as needed. A beneficial byproduct of these reviews is the transfer of knowledge between projects about beneficial project management processes and procedures. Project managers benefit from this experience because it gives them an efficient and effective way to communicate information about their projects and to obtain help resolving issues. Middle managers benefit as well. One of the biggest challenges for those moving up the management track is knowing what is going on (Hersey 1988); the information flowing to middle managers is often incomplete, inaccurate, conflicting, and overwhelming. The value of project reviews to middle managers is that it raises the quality of the information while also reducing the burden of managing it.

Work In Steering Groups – In this role, middle managers accept the ultimate responsibility for project success by being a project sponsor or member of the project steering group. A steering group is made up of representatives of a project's buyer, supplier, and sometimes also the subcontractor's management. Through work

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in the steering group, middle managers review plans, accept deliverables, and ensure the linkage between the project and the organization's strategy. In steering group meetings, middle managers are kept informed of the project progress, decide on changes to the project, and are able to take corrective actions if projects deviate from plan. Middle managers in these meetings work hard to get the best ranking and resources for their projects, as well as the most attention from top managers in order to succeed with their interests.

Procurement Of Resources – This role ensures that resources are obtained for the projects in an economical manner and are aligned with the organizational strategy. Resources include both funding and staffing. One method identified for obtaining staffing is for middle managers to have long-term relationships with skilled specialists to engage them in projects on an as-needed basis. As far as funding goes, middle managers can work within their scope of authority and shift funds between projects in their organization and they can rely on systems and relationships they have established with executive management and others in the organization to request needed funding.

Identification Of Bad Projects – Within this role, middle managers use a variety of information sources to identify troubled projects. These include project reports of consolidated portfolio reports, cost and time performance measures against plan, and earned value results. These are complemented by reports on organizational results, profit and loss statements, cost, revenue, and utilization reports. A middle manager's ability to detect troubled projects is linked with the organization's communications system and culture; an environment where communication occurs in an open and truthful manner allows troubled projects to be identified early enough for help or corrective action.

All middle managers were found to be engaged in improving their organizational processes and coaching of project managers. Interestingly, the study also revealed what not to do. Middle managers in low-performing organizations were more likely to focus on administration, such as documentation of standards and routines.

Aids To Action

Get Help

So now the challenge is to act on the knowledge about program management and to act on the research about middle management. Middle managers must take this action in a world where they are pulled in different directions and where they are suspicious of project management, and project managers must help middle management with the solution while not worsening the problem. The few middle managers who fall into the hero category may choose to go it alone, but for the majority of middle managers **a powerful aid to action is to get help** (Haneberg 2005). Fortunately, no shortage of help exists; middle managers can turn to each other, to executives, and to project managers for help.

When they turn to their peers, they often find other middle managers with interest in taking action, or better yet, they find others who have already taken action and can share. In project-based matrix organizations the likelihood of finding other middle managers with similar problems and interests in taking action is fairly high. Similarly, middle managers can turn to executive management for help. The executive actions for project success are known (O'Brochta 2005, O'Brochta 2006). In fact, since the list of these executive actions includes engaging middle management and offering to help, executives who are predisposed to helping with project management are already inclined to help middle management as well. Perhaps the best place for middle managers to turn for help, albeit one that is frequently overlooked, is project managers themselves. Since today's project managers are more knowledgeable than ever before, they are well positioned to provide assistance. This assistance can include the actual implementing of the middle managers' actions for project success, and it can include shaping these actions to be sensitive to the constraints imposed by their particular organization's business context, maturity, and readiness level.

Project Management Council

And now for the "silver bullet" approach that can work in virtually all situations, with various business contexts, across organizational maturity barriers, and across change readiness levels (Exhibit 4). The approach is to

form a Project Management Council. It is effective at identifying and overcoming many of the barriers to project success. It can be the key to identifying which actions the middle manager should take for project success. It can accelerate the middle manager's ability to act for project success, and it can amplify the power of the middle manager to get others to act for project success. It is a favorite approach (Exhibit 6). It has been used often (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, 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. An 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.

Exhibit 4 - Silver Bullet

A project management council can and should serve as a link between project managers and mid and executive levels of management. Sizing the council to no more than about a dozen people, having it chaired and/or sanctioned by a mid or senior level manager, 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 management and provide help with implementing the management 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.

For Example

Let's look at the example of how a middle manager might deal with the case where both executives and project managers are turning to him to fix the new project reporting and control system. This example is aligned fairly closely with the program governance theme contained in *The Standard For Program Management* and can, therefore, be considered well within the scope of responsibility for a middle manager. When looking over the list of roles associated with middle managers in successful organizations it appears that this example falls squarely under the role of handling project-related issues; the issue here is that a project reporting and control system needs improving. Note that this role includes adopting a genuine "what can I do to help" attitude. Also note that the silver bullet approach of using a project management council is a most effective way of providing this help. Assuming that no project management council currently exists, the middle manager's action is to form one. Since the example includes a specific problem in need of a solution, then the project management council should be formed with participants qualified to work the specific problem given; following that early success, the project management council can and should be asked to provide an assessment of and recommendations for additional actions.

Next Steps

Near-Term Progress

The middle manager's job has much to do with the tactical; consequently, progress needs to be visible and near-term. The steps for middle managers to act for project success must include a couple of early victories that are communicated broadly. After that, success can be incremental and cumulative. It does not have to come all at once, and it does not have to occur in all elements or all projects in the organization at the same pace. However, since the half-life for change made at the mid-level in an organization can be remarkably short, it does need to demonstrate

periodic progress. The good news is that middle manager actions visible to project managers in-and-of-itself can stimulate meaningful change.

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