You Know You Are A Project Manager When…

Michael O'Brochta, ACP, PMP
President, Zozer Inc.

Abstract

When are you a project manager? Simple question. It is a question being asked and answered by an increasingly large number of people. Indeed, project management was ranked in 2009 by *U.S. News and World Report* as the third-most valued skill by employers, behind only leadership/negotiation skills and business analysis. More than 600,000 people from 184 countries are members and/or credential holders in the world's largest project management professional association, the Project Management Institute. It is a question being asked increasingly by individuals striving to adopt the practices in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide), the International Project Management Association (IPMA) certification, and by U.S. government civilian employees as they endeavor to align their skills with the Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM). So, how do you know when you are a project manager?

This paper will offer some insights into important aspects of being a project manager. It will explore project managers' view of work, the attitudes of project managers when confronted with barriers and obstacles, and the relationship of project managers with their customers and stakeholders. A comparison will be made between accidental or interim project managers and career project managers. Project manager behavior toward relationships, toward decision-making, toward power, and toward their project, will be reviewed. A simplified checklist will be included that can be used as an aid in determining if you are a project manager.

This paper is intended to provoke critical thinking about what it means to be a project manager and perhaps to provoke some introspection about being a project manager.

Introduction

The Problem

Project management is an activity bring undertaken by increasingly large numbers of people worldwide; according to a study published by the Anderson Economic Group, an average of 1.2 million project management positions will need to be filled each year through 2016 (PMI, 2011, p. 16). Large numbers of those people adopting and using project management are doing so after they have established a career and work history in other fields. These people are discovering the **value of project management** when applied to these fields: information technology specialists are using project management for to improve product and service delivery; health care professionals are using project management for efforts to advance patient care; corporate mid and senior level managers are using project management for efforts to achieve strategic goals; sales and marketing professionals are using project management for efforts to increase market share; and education professionals are using project management for the development of new curriculums.

This steep growth in the application of project management has been met, in part, by the growth of opportunities for individuals to learn about and apply project management. The project management profession has responded by expanding its capacity, as have the training industry and higher education. The Project Management Institute (PMI) increased by a factor of ten during to 1990s, grew another six times during the 2000s, and stands today at over 600,000 members and credential holders (PMI, 2012, p 2). Approximately 660 institutions now offer a project management degree or certificate program, a ten-fold growth in a decade (PMI, 2010, p. 2).

With this steep growth of project management, we find that increasing numbers of individuals in other fields are **adopting project management practices** to support their chosen field, we find increasing numbers of individuals drawn into project management positions, and we find increasing numbers of individuals referring to themselves as project managers. Many of these individuals may have benefited from formalized project management training and/or education, some may find themselves in actual project manager positions and/or career paths, and

some may be involved with project management as a tangential and/or temporary undertaking. This raises a question about **what exactly is a project manager?** What does it mean to be a project manager? When are you a project manager? What characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs constitute the essence of being a project manager? To borrow from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "To be a project manager, or not to be a project manager, that is the question."

Why It Matters

The questions about being a project manager are about more than just semantics. The questions speak to core qualities associated with project management and project managers. Indeed, it is these **core qualities that distinguish the great project managers from the remainder of the pack**. A survey of over 5,000 project managers and stakeholders has provided an extraordinary insight into what the top 2 percent know and do that everyone else does not (Crowe, 2006, p. 13-25). This study focused on identifying the best project managers (referred to as "Alpha project managers") and then on determining what they did that made them the best. Opinions about these project managers were obtained from their team members, their customers, and their management. Opinions were focused on eight specific areas: attitude and belief, communication, alignment, approach and organization, focus and prioritization, issue management, relationships and conflict, and leadership. Some of the study results reveal large differences between what the Alpha project managers believe and do versus the non-Alpha project managers.

Exhibit 1 contains a fictional situation where an experienced and successful individual in the information technology field aspires toward project management. In the scenario we encounter someone who may be learning and even applying some of the fundamental project management concepts and practices – at least in the classroom. However we also find a gap between what the individual has learned and what they are able to actually do. The scenario suggests that this gap is related to the lack of an underlying instinct, the instinct to act as a project manager. This underlying instinct is precisely what was addressed in the study of Alpha project managers, It speaks to the core characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs constitute the essence of being a project manager.

A Definition

The Project Management Institute (PMI, 2013, p. 555) defines a project manager as "the person assigned by the performing organization to lead the team that is responsible for achieving the project objectives." While this definition addresses the role and responsibilities of the project manager, it is silent regarding the underlying aspects of being a project manager. This paper takes the position that assigned role or responsibilities are necessary but not sufficient to be a project manager. This paper takes the position that the underlying aspects are as important, if not more important, considerations for being a project manager. This paper takes the position that the definition of project manager must include consideration of project manager **characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs**.

George aspires to be a project manager. He has had some success in his chosen career in information technology while supporting the operations of deployed systems. That success has sparked his interest in the work that occurs before the systems are deployed and become operational. George is interested in working on the development and implementation of these systems; the work that leads to operations. George is interested in project management.

George has acted on his interests by taking a series of project management training classes and workshops where he has been exposed to some of the fundamental project management concepts and practices, and he has explored using those concepts and practices in a classroom setting. He has even begun looking for opportunities in his current job assignment to apply what he is learning.

George is finding a gap between what he thinks he has learned about project management and his ability to apply it to his work environment. When presented with an opportunity in his current job to undertake some new work, George does not instinctively focus on the purpose or requirements for the new work, nor does he gravitate toward thoroughly planning the new work. Instead, George draws upon his operations background, and jumps directly into addressing the new work at hand.

Exhibit 1 – A Situation

Underlying Project Manager Aspects

Alpha Study

Although in this study (Crowe, 2006, p. 84-89, p. 106-107) both Alphas and non-Alphas understood equally the importance of planning, the Alphas dedicated **double the amount of project time to actually do the planning**. Alphas spent on average a total of 21 percent of all project labor hours on planning. And it wasn't just the planning associated with the up front project planning, it was also the planning that occurs throughout the life cycle. Similarly, both Alphas and non-Alphas equally understood the value of communication; however, the Alphas were viewed by others as being much **more effective at performing the actual communication** (80 percent for Alphas vs. 49 percent for non-Alphas). The communication they paid the most attention to was with their stakeholders; Alphas constantly asked others for their opinions about the project, and they responded with information tailored to their stakeholders' interests. They set a communication schedule and adhered to it stridently. They communicated their message in a clear and concise manner, without wasting time, by tailoring their message and delivery to the specific needs of each stakeholder.

The Alpha project managers (Crowe, 2006, p. 64-65) were found to **believe strongly that they had enough authority** to manage the project (89 percent for Alphas vs. 49 percent for non-Alphas).

> *The degree of authority a manager has on a project directly corresponds to how much authority he believes he has. Several times, the attitude was conveyed that project managers who believe that are empowered and behave accordingly usually have a greater level of authority conferred upon them than those managers who believe they lack an organizational mandate.*

> *Alphas take the project assignment as a mandate to lead. They assume authority to match their given responsibility, and they lead the project accordingly.*

This data supports the maxim to "take action now and ask forgiveness later." This type of action requires attitude, and **attitude abounds with Alphas** (Crowe, 2006, p. 50-51). They enjoy their work more than their counterparts. Alphas reported that they generally loved their jobs twice as much as non-Alphas (67 percent for Alphas vs. 32% for non-Alphas). This attitude caused Alphas to tend to treat project management more as a career unto itself, whereas non-Alphas tended to view it as a stepping-stone. Alphas do not see themselves as accidental, or interim, or incidental project managers.

Incidental Project Manager

The concept of incidental, or accidental, or interim project manager has been explored and compared to the career project manager (Pinto, 1995, p. 42). These terms have been used to describe individuals that may be employing, or trying to employ, project management practices even though they may not be in full-time established project manager positions. The project management practices may be incidental to the primary focus of their job, or they find themselves performing these practices quite by accident without the realization that the practices are associated with project management, or they may look at their practice of project management as a temporary interim assignment. The incidental project manager more likely has a technical background, often as an engineer, programmer, systems analyst, or similar. By contrast, the career project manager will more likely have, or seek, a formal project management education, and have, or seek, experience in management and organizational skills. The career project manager may also have some knowledge relating to functionality, features, or domain of the project deliverables. Figure 2 lists the characteristics that have been associated with incidental and career project managers. The data in the table is supported by research that shows that project success and failure is located in the "softer" side of project manager responsibilities. That type of success hinges more on effective leadership, team management, and stakeholder management. The research also provides evidence about growing numbers of project managers who are entering the profession reluctantly and unprepared and who are finding themselves lacking adequate support from within their organizations and from their management. This lack of preparedness and lack of support is a double whammy that can derail many of the non-Alphas.

Issue	Incidental Project Manager	Career Project Manager
Education	technical	management
Entry to Project Management	accidental	planned after qualifying
Desire	return to technical field	remain in project management
Advanced Education	unknown, possibly technical	project management
View of Project Management	necessary intrusion as a career step	interesting, and rewarding progression of increasingly challenging assignments
Professional Goals	specialist with technical recognition	generalist with management advancement
Knowledge/Skill Required	technologist with detailed in-depth	generalist with broad scope

Exhibit 2 – Project Manager Differences

Discipline and Willpower

As evidenced in the Alpha study, knowing what to do and actually doing it are two different things. In that study, virtually all project managers were familiar with the concept of project planning; yet it was the Alphas who actually took part in planning twice as often as the others. Even entry-level project managers with little or know experience can accurately describe the reasons behind the importance of planning and communication. Only the Alphas **possessed the discipline to do the basics**. They understood and acted on the priority to do the basics by reducing or eliminating time spent on lower priority activities. They possessed the discipline to carve precious time out of their busy days to do the basics. They spent more time on the important and less time on the immediate. Were the others not disciplined enough? Apparently, they were not. "It is my experience that project managers are **not willing to make the tough and unpopular project-related decisions**, even though their instincts warn them that they are not taking the most effective action," says one of the most listened to modern-day project management gurus (Whitten, 2005, p. 42). Similarly, one of todays most highly regarded business experts reports that "**an absolutely iron will**" is essential in moving from good to great (Collins, 2001, p. 271). My view (O'Brochta, 2008, p. 1-2) is that "**project management is about applying common sense with uncommon discipline."**

Fortunately, there is now science behind the building of discipline and willpower (McGonigal, 2011, p. 59). Our brains include the willpower muscle, and it gets used every day. And like a muscle, willpower can be strengthened. Researchers are learning what kind of calisthenics it takes to get our willpower into shape. First and foremost is the discipline of routine and habit. Even a small change to a routine, if repeated often enough, will evolve into a new habit. Adding a new project management basic to your routine will, if it does not require too much extra effort, evolve into a standard behavior. Small increments accomplished over an extended period of time will produce notable increases in willpower, similar to the progression experienced by someone starting a new physical fitness program.

Goal Oriented

In projects, considerable effort is associated with the goal. Business and stakeholder needs are captured in a scope statement, milestones and deliverables are captured in a plan, and deadlines are captured in a schedule. All of these become goals for the project manager. Recall that the definition of a project manager is the person who is responsible for "achieving the project objectives." So, by definition, **effective project managers need are goal oriented**. They accomplish this by possessing the ability to respond to barriers and obstacles with alternatives and work-arounds that are focused on the goals. Progress is always forward. They anticipate and forecast future events with the potential to impact the forward progress and they develop contingencies. They also do this by forming and maintaining relationships with those who can support their satisfaction of the project goals. These relationships can

be called upon in times of need. The Alpha study results (Crowe, 2006, p. 67-70) show that "Alphas demonstrated the ability to create and maintain focus on the right goals and objectives more effectively than their peers." They spent less time in meetings and less time responding to e-mails than their counterparts, yet they were viewed by customers, team members, and senior management as being more responsive to their project-related requests. This goal-orientation is yet another aspect of having the discipline to maintain focus on the basics.

Decision-Making and Power

Recall that Alpha project managers act presuming authority. They accomplish this through strong decision-making skills and through the development of their own personal power. Decisions are focused more on the **needs of the project** and less on serving other agendas. Decisions are make after quickly sifting (Crowe, 2006, p. 71-75) through the continuous river of information flowing their way and isolating only that which is essential to their decision. They accomplish this by basing decisions on considerations about how the current conditions differ from the established and baselined plan; large deviations require important decisions and small deviations may only require minor decisions. Decisions are made based more on rational analysis of the alternatives and less on intuition; they may use techniques that consider the alternative pros and cons, strength weakness opportunity threats analysis (SWOT), pairwise comparison, or weighted decision tree. Decisions are made based more on pre-formulated alternatives and contingency plans and less on spontaneous reaction.

Through the understanding and use of power, the project manager can accomplish a tremendous amount of what is needed to achieve his/her project goals. Power refers to the ability of the project manager to **influence others to act for the benefit of the project**; it is a resource that enables compliance or commitment from others (Pinto, 1996, p. 43). As illustrated in Exhibit 3, we can recognize that as project leaders we rarely have significant amounts of positional power; our formal authority is usually quite limited within the organization. However, we do have
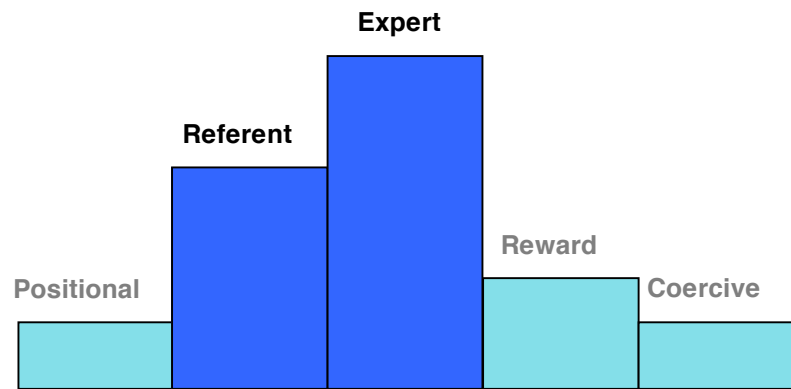

Exhibit 3 – Project Manager Power

opportunities to develop and use sources of power that others don't. Specifically, we are the experts; no one knows more about our project, or our portion of the project, than we do. This knowledge can serve as the basis for opinions, decisions, and actions that are rational and well supported. Through communication early and often with key stakeholders about the project and tailoring that information to the specific needs of each stakeholder, project leaders can establish themselves as **experts about the subject they know best** – their projects. Over time the recognition of their expertise will grow, and so will the dependence by key stakeholders on this expertise; this represents a growth in the project leader's expert power. At some point, this power will have grown to the point where the project leader is called upon to provide expertise about a topic that is less related to his/her actual project; this is the point in time where his/her power has grown so significantly that he/she can begin using their power to accomplish project leadership actions related to building and maintaining their high performance team. A second source of power at the project leader's disposal is his/her perceived association with others who are influential: referent power. Successful project leaders **develop and cultivate relationships** with a vast array of stakeholders that extend far beyond the immediate bounds of their project. The fact that so many projects are managed in matrix organizations further enhances this effect. The expert and referent sources of power, particularly for a project leader, can distinguish the actions we want to take from the blur of other activity in the organization.

Conclusion

Project Manager State of Being

The notion that project management has less to do with title or position and more to do with attitude and behavior has been explored. Opportunities for critical thought have been provided regarding what it means to be a project manager and about being a project manager. Observations have been made about the project managers' view of work, of barriers, of relationships, of decision-making, of power, and of their projects. Discipline and willpower have been suggested as key attributes for the advancement of the project manager. The implications of these observations and suggestions can lead to actions not only by emerging project managers as they navigate strategically along a progression of work experiences, but also for established project managers who are looking reflectively at the path that they have followed. Exhibit 4 contains a listing of the summary points in the paper that can be considered if you really want to know if you are a project manager.

You Know You Are A Project Manager When…
The subject of being a project manager matters.
The definition of project manager expands to include characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs.
Planning and communication receive necessary attention.
Actions are taken presuming authority.
It is all about the project goals.
It is more than just incidental.
Discipline exists to do the basics.
Decisions are made based on project needs.
Power is developed and used for project benefit.

Exhibit 4 – Project Manager State of Being

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