

E-PROJECT MANAGEMENT 102 – THE HUMAN ELEMENT

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APOLOGIES

Before even going beyond the first sentence I wanted to make two things very clear about this paper with respect to its content and style. First of all, it has absolutely zero technical content!!! In fact there is not one stitch of enlightenment about the latest techniques for data modeling, optimized code generation or even “do or die” tips on user interface design. Of course if I were reading a paper on the “Human Element” of project management I wouldn’t expect anything technical anyway. But I just thought it appropriate to warn you ahead of time.

And that’s the second thing I wanted to mention... and apologize for. This paper is written in the style of “first person.” That means you will see the word “I” used throughout. For several weeks I wracked my brain as to how to best present a paper such as this, one that tells primarily of experiences I’ve had in twenty-five years of managing projects and being under the tutelage of other excellent managers to whom I am most grateful. Finally after checking with the colleague who had “conned” me into writing this paper in the first place (and I’m certainly glad he did), I decided it would be OK to use “first person.”

I hope you will all accept my apology for writing in such a style and for omitting the small bit of technical knowledge I do possess. Now that I’ve gotten these issues out of the way, and hopefully you will want to keep reading, let’s continue into some of the more relevant content pertaining to managing projects with the human element in mind.

INTRODUCTION

This paper shares many of my personal ideas, philosophies, and a few anecdotes that help to illustrate the way I perceive (and try to execute) my style of project management. It certainly is not the “end all” document on project management; however, there may be one or two ideas “worth taking home with you.” Traditional project management courses techniques focus on project planning, budget management, resource allocation, and other critical administrative aspects to managing projects. Planning and administration are extremely important to bringing home a project successfully. However, there is an entire element of project management I have not yet seen presented (probably because I haven’t looked at the appropriate web site). These project aspects have to do with people; namely, the human elements of managing a project, which, at least in my opinion, are equally as important in making a project successful.

In this paper I share a number of ideas and techniques that have worked for me. As Warren Buffett said, “In the business world, the rearview mirror is always clearer than the windshield.” So why not learn from prior experiences??!! Some of this is “motherhood and apple pie,” but it works. How do I know these methods and philosophies work...because I am consistently being asked to return and manage other projects, and most of the team members of the previous project want to come along for the ride on the new project as well. I see this not so much a tribute to the person running the project as much as to acknowledging a set of principles, techniques and values that are being used to effectively bring out the best in a project team.

As a caveat, these techniques and thoughts won’t always work for everyone. We all do things a bit differently. That’s what makes project management so enjoyable... because we’re all different! However, if you’re anything like me, we are constantly looking for new ideas and for better ways of doing things. I hope this paper will provide such a catalyst to stimulate new thoughts and perhaps bring more attention to the human element of project management.

SYMBIOSIS

I can honestly say that my metrics for “bringing home” a successful project have changed over the years. Initially I looked at meeting budget, completing on schedule, and implementing the expected application with minimal bumps and bruises as the

most critical marks of success. Don't get me wrong; these are extremely important factors. However, today my measures of a successful project are different. My personal satisfaction for a project is more derived now from how well the team functions as a unit, how effectively we utilize each team member's experience, abilities and knowledge, and whether each person grows in a positive way as a result of working on the project.

Symbiosis, according to Webster, is the "mutually beneficial relationship between persons..." Projects are too big and complex, and the schedules too short, for one person to do it all by him or herself, even if that person possessed all the necessary talents and skills. Projects must be done in teams...that is **TEAMS**. A loosely organized group of individuals is just not good enough. It must be a **TEAM!**

In fact I believe the single most important goal of a project manager is to **encourage and facilitate the combined efforts of the project team members to exceed the accomplishments that could be achieved solely through individual team member efforts**. That's a lot of words that says the team functions more effectively as a cohesive unit than as just a bunch of individuals working independently towards a common goal. Certainly this represents a lofty goal, one that is not easily accomplished. I cannot claim that every project I've been involved with has achieved this goal. However, from personal experience I can say there is nothing more rewarding than to work with a group of individuals on a project where the team is truly working together as a cohesive, well functioning unit. That's really fun!!!

BE THYSELF...

I learned a lesson several years ago that I still remember quite distinctly to this day. I had just taken on a new position to lead a project with a very important company client. I was replacing an outstanding project manager who had maintained an extremely fine track record with this client. He was successful and well respected. The logical conclusion... I wanted to be just like him.

What a mistake! He had his style, his way of doing things, and he did them extremely well. I made every attempt to emulate his style and methods, and was failing miserably. I can honestly say I was not succeeding in managing the project or in my relationship with the project team. We were slipping schedule daily. Finally after considerable frustration, I conferred with another colleague regarding my situation admitting to him my struggles. He gave me two words of advice..."Be yourself!" I took this advice to heart. It was truly amazing the transformation. I began to relax. I started to engage a style of project management that I felt better about and immediately began to see a change in the team's dynamics. Once I began to feel comfortable with myself and with my own management style, the other team members were able to relax and enjoy their individual uniquenesses as well. The project took on a whole new dimension and became a lot more fun for everyone.

The reason I mention this story is because I have seen all too often new project managers try to take on a persona that is not their own. They are given a new project or management responsibility and want to make an immediate impact. That is fine and admirable. Yet what typically results is a forced management style that in the long run is not very effective and has negative impact instead.

People are usually given project management responsibility because they possess reasonably good people skills and have the ability to get things done. Yet when they are given a formal role of a project manager, something happens, and it is usually not positive. Generally, it's a result of making the same mistake I made... being someone they're really not. The only advice I will give in this entire paper is the same that my colleague gave me... **"Be yourself!"**

ACKNOWLEDGE THE T.E.A.M.

A project manager is only as good as the team working with him or her. The sooner a project manager realizes this fact, the better.

The project manager sets the tone. Projects get tough enough without injecting negative influences and disparaging comments. I constantly look for opportunities to acknowledge the efforts and skills of my project team members...not in a gushy way because people readily see through the insincerity of such words. But everyone needs an occasional "pick-me-up," a word of encouragement, recognition for a job well done. It takes a conscious effort on the part of the project manager to acknowledge excellent performance. Yet what results from such small accolades is an even better effort from the team as the members begin to realize their collective capabilities.

“TAKE CHARGE!”

“Take Charge!” This was the sage advice given to me by one of the executive sponsors I worked with on an international finance and distribution system project. The project effort was not moving very fast and I was brought in to lead. Besides the words “Take charge!” he also cautioned me, “You have a very talented group of people working for you. Guide them, don’t stifle them.”

Too often I have seen project managers, especially inexperienced project managers, do one of two things to the project team. They either take suffocating control of a project to the point where everyone is afraid to act, or the project manager fails to act` choosing to sit on the sideline while the project proceeds rudderless. I believe there is a balance between these two extremes. The project manager needs to provide strong overall guidance for the project while empowering the individual project team member’s to fully utilize their talents in their areas of expertise.

“That’s your decision.” is an important phrase I use to give full authority to a team member. The message here is very explicit. “You are being empowered and entrusted with that decision. Whatever you decide we will abide by.” The most difficult part of this process is for the project manager not to second guess whatever decision has been made. Sometimes this process doesn’t result in the optimal solution, but it certainly conveys a message of confidence within the team.

Another way of looking at this was stated by one of the finest manufacturing consultants whom I have ever had an opportunity to work with. She said, “A good project manager wants to be fully responsible for a project. If the project manager doesn’t feel this way, they’re not worth having on the project.” This is a tall order, to say the least. It requires the project manager to put his/her full heart and soul into the project to the point of being personally responsible. Yet this is really what it takes to make projects truly successful. It is also one of the reasons why this consultant friend of mine is in such demand. Once a project manager is given the authority to lead, **they need to take ownership and LEAD!**

THE UBIQUITOUS PROJECT MANAGER

Webster’s definition of “ubiquitous”, is “existing or being everywhere, especially at the same time.” Ubiquitous is great word especially when it comes to project management. It represents the epitome of project management, being everywhere at once and knowing everything that is going on.

As humanly impossible as this may be, I believe it is instrumental that a project manager maintains a constant, ubiquitous presence throughout the project. This includes attending as many key meetings and telecons as possible, even if only for a few minutes. This enables the project manager to gain a sense of meeting’s direction and/or tone.

The project manager should be constantly communicating key decisions that effect other portions of the project. They should also be following up on key issues to make certain these get addressed with consistency in conjunction with other aspects of the project. The project manager is generally the only one who is aware of what is happening across the entire project to provide consistency in communication and decision-making.

My experience is that the more I am aware of the activities and decisions occurring across a project, the more smoothly a project proceeds forward. This takes significant time and effort especially as projects become more global in scope. It is also a delicate balance between providing guidance and communication across the entire project, and stepping on people’s toes. However, without one person hovering over the entire project providing consistent guidance and input, the project soon begins to lose its overall direction and starts to founder.

I’ve been told the project manager is the “glue” that holds a project together. This isn’t a bad image for any project manager to keep in the back of their mind.

MBWA

I appreciate people who have “been there, done that” and are willing to share their experience and knowledge. We have such an opportunity to learn from their experiences... and mistakes. At a former company I had become acquainted with the Product Assurance Manager, named Steve. We worked together on a couple projects. On one of these projects, he was the

business sponsor and therefore responsible for setting up project meetings. It occurred to me that we always seemed to be meeting in different locations on the seven-building campus. Finally, I asked Steve, “Why can’t we just meet in the same place from week to week?” The response I received was most interesting.

“Well, Ed, I’m employing the technique of MBWA.”

“MBWA?”

“Yes, MBWA. Management by Walking Around.”

Steve went on to explain that it was his expressed purpose every day to visit at least one of his six department sections, and just walk around talking to both the line workers and the section leads, to obtain a pulse of the activities in that area. He would also be sure to tell a joke or two just to let people know he wasn’t there just on a work-related mission.

Steve made a point not to interfere directly in the operation of the group unless requested; that was the section lead’s job. Yet what I observed within Steve’s department was a tremendous sense of purpose and loyalty. And Steve always knew what was going on, which is critical for any manager... All accomplished by MBWA.

My point in mentioning this conversation is that with projects moving at a faster and faster pace, there unfortunately isn’t always time for keeping on top of the pulse of a project through daily one-to-one contact. I’ve tried to adopt Steve’s style (except for the jokes...I’m a terrible joke teller) making periodic telephone calls or visits to find out how things are going. This takes a very deliberate effort. I always know what the key deliverables are throughout the life cycle of the project, and who is working on them. But it takes a very conscious effort, and time out of every day, to visit and monitor progress, and also to intervene when there are apparent issues.

However, what is most rewarding are the personal relationships that are developed during these one-on-one or small group sessions. It’s well worth the time and effort... and every once in a while we even hear a good joke.

“HOW CAN I HELP?”

As a project team is being formed, a project manager should be looking for the best people possible to fill the respective roles. However, this doesn’t always happen. Sometimes you are given a weak player or two, or a person takes on more than they can handle. I believe it is the responsibility of the project manager to mentor his or her team, trying to bring out the best each team member. This means possibly reassigning responsibilities, providing additional support or training, or least desirable, moving the person off the team. The last of these options is used only as a final resort.

We have our usual status meetings where we review tasks and progress with the team members. I am not big on excuses. Meeting deadlines is critical to the project’s success. However, too often I hear inexperienced project managers conducting inquisitions and handing out tongue-lashings to team members for what is perceived to be inadequate progress. I have received a few of such beratings myself. I don’t like them personally and have seen such tirades set well-functioning teams back significantly.

The method I like to use when things appear to be stymied is to ask the simple question, “How can I (or we) help?” This is a very benign, yet effective question, which promotes teamwork while many times pinpointing the source of the stalemate. More often than not the person being asked this question is able to focus on resolution of the problem rather than worrying about their lack of progress. They realize they are not being looked down upon, that they are part of a collective effort where we all want to succeed... that they are important enough to the team to receive the specific attention and the help that they rightly reserve.

On more than one occasion I have seen a transformation with the person who is being offered help. They walk out of the focused session greatly relieved with a burden lifted off their shoulders since it is now the responsibility of the team rather than just that person alone to resolve the issue. And the usual result is that the person being offered assistance ends up solving the problem his or herself shortly thereafter knowing that they have the confidence and support of the project team and management.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR SUPERSTARS

Every project has its superstars, individuals who make contributions that far exceed the expectations of us “mere mortals.” A phenomenon I have repeatedly observed is that because these people are REALLY, REALLY, REALLY GOOD, they tend to be highly in demand. This results in their often taking on more tasks and responsibility than they should. This is largely because these people are highly self-motivated and have a strong sense of commitment to the project. Correspondingly, most of their tasks cannot be reassigned to other team members due to short time schedules, requiring special skill-sets, or because the task is just plain hard to do. This presents the dilemma of the “over-utilized resource.”

I am convinced that a high level of effort (and the corresponding number of extremely long hours) can be maintained for a substantial period of time... perhaps a month or maybe two. However, even with the most talented of individuals, when this intense effort persists for months on end, it begins to result in diminished performance, fatigue, illness and eventually more serious consequences associated with burnout. I strongly believe it is the manager and/or project manager’s responsibility to look out for and protect their people... especially their superstars.

These individuals have such an elevated standard of excellence that they will push through to achieve their goal, oftentimes, no matter what the cost. Sometimes a prolonged, intense push is necessary... but it should be the exception and not the rule. It becomes the Project Manager’s responsibility to intervene, reduce the workload, and/or give some time off if necessary. The words “Go home!” are sometimes the best instruction on a late night project.

One of my former managers asked me once, “Do you know the difference between a thoroughbred horse and a mule?” I answered, “No.” He went on to explain that a thoroughbred will press on and on in a race giving its ‘all’ until it finally drops dead. When a mule gets to the point where it is willing to take no more, it just digs in its hooves, balks and stops.” This manager went on to explain that this also applies to people. His words to me were, “Our superstars tend to be more like thoroughbreds. They’ll run and they’ll run until they drop. We need watch over them sometimes to the point of teaching them to act more like jackasses.” Words well spoken!

KNOW THY TEAM MEMBERS’ FAVORED COMMUNICATION MEDIA

Each person on a project, or just in general, tends to communicate favoring one or two specific media or methods. In this day and age of cell phones, voicemail, email, pagers, etc., people are bombarded with hundreds, if not thousands of communicated messages each day. Some are heeded; many go ignored. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to figure out the way that each person best receives and understands a communication to ultimately gain their full attention even for a brief period of time. This is true with projects as well as with life in general.

A particular instance in my past of this “need to communicate and gain one’s full attention” comes to mind. I had returned to “the States” after a stint over in the UK implementing a finance and distribution system. It was urgent that I get in touch with the Distribution Manager, Tony, to close off on a particularly important issue. I tried emailing him... no response... calling his mobile phone ... no response ... leaving a message with the receptionist ... no response. Finally, before giving up entirely, I resorted to sending a fax. Of course it wasn’t your standard fax... it was a fax with a poem on it... “An Ode to Tony” explaining in rhyme why I needed to talk to him right away. The result... I received a phone call from Tony five minutes later. Tony did comment that I shouldn’t quit my day job in lieu of becoming a poet laureate, but mission accomplished.

Sometimes it takes persistence to get a message across; but more often, it takes understanding the method by which individuals prefer to communicate. People who work with me know that if they want to get my attention they need to send me an interactive page or email. Trying to reach me by phone is a waste of time because I’m seldom at my desk. In contrast, I know certain individuals who, if I really need to get in touch, I will not use a pager... because they don’t carry it with them. So I use a phone. Still, my favorite means of communication is face-to-face. There’s something special about seeing someone in person.

LEARNING STYLES: AUDIO, VISUAL, OR TACTILE

I am hardly an expert on this topic, but think it's worth mentioning since a general understanding of how people learn enhances communication and understanding within the project team. People do tend to favor at least one of the visual, tactile or audio styles of learning. Visual and audio styles are most often employed on a daily basis during a project, especially during project meetings. Tactile learning tends to be used more during training sessions. The important thing is to realize that people do have preferences and that all three learning styles should be accommodated whenever possible.

I certainly have my preferences. The joke in the office is that I can't communicate in a group without a whiteboard to draw on. I am a visual learner.

There are certain individuals on my project teams that are strongly audio learners. It is always my secret goal to get them up to the whiteboard and draw their ideas in red, blue, black and green. Sometimes I go so far as to start a drawing and hand them a pen. (Usually the first thing they do is erase what I've just put on the board because it's entirely incorrect... but at least now they are drawing pictures!) This is so important to us poor visual learners. We need to see things in concrete visual terms. To capture an example or concept on the board not only clarifies the concept but can also enable the example to be used for documentation purposes later on. But most of all, it supports the two methods of learning most often seen on projects: audio and visual.

“PUSH” COMMUNICATION – LEAVE NO ROOM FOR MISUNDERSTANDING

Generally when we set up a project we have common document library on a server “somewhere” that we're all supposed to update statuses, etc. Thankfully there are better ways of managing project documents. But nonetheless this principle still applies.

I believe it is extremely important to “push” communication to those involved with the project. Let me explain what this means.

One of my pet peeves is when I receive an email saying, “Look in the status file in the project directory.” That's it... short, sweet, and vague. My issue with this type of communication is that it is not explicit. What is the actual name of the status file and directory (generally there are several “status” files for a large project)? Am I accessing the correct document being referred to by the sender of the email?

I call this “pull” communication because someone has to hunt around and make all the effort to “pull” the desired information for themselves. I prefer to make access of documents as simple as possible for the email recipients. More importantly, I believe “pull communication” requires too much work for the recipients, leaves far too much room for error and thus, results in incorrect or non-communication.

My preference is to either include the full path and file name, a shortcut or URL (I really like a “double-click” solution) or to attach the document directly. This way the document is made explicitly available. Most people, especially those higher up in the management hierarchy, will not search out an unnamed document located somewhere out on some obscure server. So, needless to say, if a person doesn't have the time or inclination to search out the specified file, this opportunity to communicate has failed.

However, in a similar context, verbal communication should be “pushed” as well. I find if I assume that people know something that is important to the project, they typically don't! I may have to apologize for saying the same thing over and over again. This is a very deliberate action. Yet it is far better to explicitly communicate an important point repeated times rather than making the mistake of assuming that everyone is aware AND UNDERSTANDS the impact of the information being communicated, when they really don't. **Explicit communication leaves far less room for misunderstanding.**

KEEP IT SHORT...AND SIMPLE

A former President and CEO of a hi-tech company taught me a meaningful lesson on the importance of being brief in communication. I had just prepared a proposal document for a consulting engagement. I had gone into tremendous detail

about its strategy, methodology, costs, benefits, ROI, etc., etc., all the “due-diligence” back-up that a proposal should contain. The document was approximately 30 pages... a real work of art, that needed to be signed off by this particular executive.

He called me into his office, took my document, and threw it on top of an 18-inch stack of other mail and documents that he had to read and act upon. He had made his point. I was most appreciative that he would take the time to show me his stack of that day’s reading material, and that I was increasing it substantially without adding much overall value. As a result of this lesson learned (and slight embarrassment), I took my document back, pared it down to one-fourth its size, and put a half page executive summary on the front highlighting the most important points.

I now experience this fallacy first hand. For some reason certain people believe that “more is better,” meaning the more verbose, the better a document or communication is going to be received. I couldn’t disagree more. I literally receive hundreds of emails each day. Quite honestly, don’t appreciate having to read through screen after screen of prose expounding on the virtues of a particular esoteric point or issue.

This is a common mistake. To be heard and recognized among the thousands of communications that are sent out every day, it is crucial that communications be brief, highlight the most critical issues, and be “to the point.” I like to use a bullet format where the most important ideas are written in a brief bullet text, followed by a paragraph providing the detail. This way a reader can scan the bullets and if interested, can read the detail explanation below it.

I’m sharing the written the style of communication I use. Every person develops his or her own style, which is fine. But the bottom line is: if it “ain’t” read and understood, it’s better left unsent.

“DOUBLE-CHECK, TRIPLE-CHECK AND CHECK IT AGAIN!”

“Double-Check, Triple-Check and Check It Again!” This is a tall order, and yet it was the standard of excellence expected by an executive sponsor on a recent project. This was the standard that was communicated to the project team and was espoused throughout the project. Everyone was aware of this gauge of quality, and worked to achieve it.

The importance of “The Pursuit of Excellence”, to borrow from the title of the 1980’s bestseller, needs to be communicated in whatever form that will be understood by the team. “Double-check, triple-check and check it again” was the standard we used, and the positive results were astounding.

Communicate a vision and the team will surely follow. Communicate no vision, and the team will stray.

“WE RELEASE NO SOFTWARE BEFORE ITS TIME”

Meeting increasingly compressed schedules is becoming more of a challenge each and every day. One of the greatest needs on any project, especially software-related, is to institute a Quality Assurance process at the project’s outset that will ensure the excellence of the end product. I cannot emphasize how crucial it is that a QA process be set up right up front. A quality (pardon the pun) Quality Assurance Manager can be the most influential person on the entire project.

However, even with a QA process in place, it is critical that the software not be released until it has reached a prescribed level of reliability and functionality. This is particularly true with Beta software releases where the user community is viewing the product for the first time. Despite disclaimers and other notifications, the usual end user expectation is a fully polished product.

It is the Project Manager’s responsibility, along with the QA Manager (and hopefully there is one), to not release a software product before it has sufficient functionality, it has been adequately tested, and the supporting test data has been made available. Perhaps this is a “no-brainer” and doesn’t even need to be said; however, one of the toughest decisions for a project manager is to prevent a software version from being released because it is not ready.

I know this is a difficult decision. I’ve had to hold back critical software releases on several occasions. Yet I can honestly say that any fallout that may occur when explaining to an executive sponsor that a software version is not ready, so known bugs can be corrected and value-added functionality can be incorporated, pales in comparison to the “negative press” resulting from releasing software prematurely. I fully believe it is important to set and hit deadlines. However, I once heard a wise software product manager say, “Two years from now, people will not remember whether we met our deadline or not, but they will remember if we released the software half-baked.” How very true!

“PLEASE”, “THANK YOU” AND “JOB WELL DONE”

Projects mean “PRESSURE” with a capital “P”. Everybody working on the project knows this... and lives with it. For the most part, the individuals I have worked with on projects are extremely committed, make significant sacrifices of personal and family time to work towards the success of the project, and contribute with whatever abilities, knowledge and skills that they might possess. To my mind, it is the responsibility of the project manager to ask for, acknowledge and wherever possible, seek appropriate rewards for the efforts of the team members.

I can thank my parents for a particular “hang-up” of mine. They always insisted that my brothers and I present every request with the word “Please,” and respond, in kind, with the words “Thank you.” “Basic courtesy?” “Yes!” Yet these “magic” words go such a long way towards establishing a modus operandi of respect for each team member and each person’s contributions to the project.

TANGIBLE INCENTIVES

Again, in concert with the increasing demands and compressed “time to market” for projects, I believe appropriate incentives should be offered to each member of the project team. I am mentioning this here because incentives are often overlooked. The team is required to make extreme sacrifices often to achieve the required results within the prescribed timeframe. They should be amply acknowledged with rewards that go beyond the periodic team lunches.

Incentives can be monetary, stock options and other “fun” bonuses such as all-expense paid trips. These give the team something to work for and look forward to as a reward for their hard work and sacrifices. It is best to communicate these incentives near the beginning of the project. Waiting to communicate incentives until a week before “Go Live” somehow doesn’t achieve the same result. People in general desire to do a good job, but tangible incentives just make their efforts much more appreciated.

CONCLUSION

Project management is truly an art and not a science. Every project manager has his or her own style. It’s a continual learning process and a consistent challenge to get each project to the finish line. Yet the one constant that persists beyond every project are the people who participated to make each project a reality. I am most grateful to those whom I’ve had opportunity to work alongside, to learn from, and to grow with, as we’ve tackled each new adventure together. Thank you.

AUTHOR

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Quovera provides strategy and systems integration to Fortune 500, high-growth middle market and emerging market companies. The firm specializes in delivering intelligent solutions for complex enterprises, which improve productivity within the customer's business and optimize the customer's value chain, through integration of its customers and suppliers. Quovera refers to its business model as "Intelligent – Application Integration and Management.

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