

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

What it Takes to be a Better Project Manager – Going Beyond Project Management!

By Suresh Malladi

Project Managers ensure successful execution of projects by planning, organizing, directing, monitoring, controlling and closing them. Successful project managers use various tools, techniques, methodologies, frameworks and processes to tightly monitor the projects and take them to completion. What makes them better Project Managers is their ability to see beyond the projects and create an environment where values are valued, integrity is hoisted and where professional and personal competence thrives. The purpose of this article is to highlight a half-a-dozen areas which can make a difference.

Create the Project Environment

Creating a project environment where all stakeholders can freely participate is primary for successful project management. Project managers should identify all the stakeholders and their information needs. Balancing the requirements of various stakeholders and involving them at the right time will help in defining the goals of the project. It should also be ensured that the stakeholders receive timely project communication in the format desired. Today projects are being executed in a much broader geographical context; sometimes due to outsourcing. In such a scenario, multiple factors like language, time zones, culture, communication styles etc are coming into the picture. Project Managers should ensure that all these factors are factored into the project management methodologies.

Clear lines of communication and well-defined roles and responsibilities are vital to the success in such a context. Within the project, managers should create an environment where the team members can interact with each other to freely share ideas about the project. This helps the team members to work effectively and execute better. Customers or stakeholders will have enormous expertise and the managers should devise mechanisms to absorb the knowledge and expertise of such stakeholders. The project manager should also ensure that all necessary project information and artifacts are available to the team in a timely manner. He should procure the necessary tools, templates and documentation for the project to take-off and run smoothly. He should ensure that all the policies, laws, rules and regulations are publicized and adhered to.

Mentor the team and be team oriented

Managers should provide mentoring and thought leadership for the team members. The team members consider the managers to be more experienced in functional, business and technical domains and the project managers should assist the team by mentoring them in such areas of personal competence. Managers should also ensure that the team members are contributing effectively to the project. Managers should identify the efficiencies and deficiencies of the team members and should work with them on defining the personal goals and the means to

achieve them. Managers should ensure that the career aspirations of the individuals are served, the training needs are identified and catered and should drive a feeling among the team that they have someone who is taking care of their needs and aspirations.

The managers should also instill confidence in the team that they have someone to look up to. Conducting reviews and providing feedback at the end of each phase or project is a crucial responsibility for a project manager. Project managers should ensure that the individuals receive the feedback on their performance. Recognizing the contributions of the team members will also help in the team making more effective contribution and active participation. On top of everything, the willingness of the project manager to learn and listen to others will enhance his personal competence as well as will drive a feeling that the individual ideas and contributions will be solicited and appreciated.

Share your knowledge and experience

Project managers gain knowledge and experience from their past and present projects. The project practices should be recorded and once the project becomes successful, all the good practices will evolve into best practices upon replicating them on the subsequent projects. Project managers should keep track of the successful practices and should be sharing them with others in the organization. Registering the information with a central Project Management Office kind of organization will help spread the knowledge.

Project managers should also be contributing articles in project management journals or company newsletters so that the knowledge and experience can be leveraged by others. Documentation and storage of project artifacts, conducting sessions on lessons learned etc will create a repository of project related information including the artifacts, successes and failures.

Be Honest and be Customer Oriented

Project managers should promote honesty and integrity. Providing honest information about the project will help understand the status, plan for risks, safeguard against slippages etc. Managers should provide true updates about the project status even if it means bad news. This helps to work with the stakeholders and bring necessary correction mechanisms into place. The status reports, meetings and other project discussion should provide a clear picture of what is happening. When working as an in-house or a vendor project manager, it is very important to protect the intellectual property and ensure the confidentiality, security and safety of information assets.

Customer is primary and all activities on the project should be in the best interest of the customer as he prevails over everything else in the project or team or the organization. When working with customers, it is better to provide upfront status to the customer on potential pitfalls and work on mitigation measures by taking the customer into concurrence. This will help not only the project but also to cultivate a trusted relationship with him.

Be Human, Ethical and Lawful

As said in the above sections, a Project Manager should take care of the team needs and should be empathetic to individuals. He should be ready to jump in when crisis arises, should be able to protect the team against all negative factors that influence the project, should ensure that the team is educated about the norms and customs that are contrary to the disrespectful and should gauge if there are any special barriers in terms of language, culture and customs. This becomes more important in an outsourced scenario where projects may spread across geographies. In such a case, the Project Manager should ensure that all barriers for communication are taken care of and if there is any special training needed to root out the cultural or linguistic differences.

The Project Manager should be proactive in taking ownership of errors rather than blaming it on others; particularly the project team. He should own the responsibility to meet all service levels agreed upon and the contractual obligations. He should be instrumental in constantly motivating the teams and help them realize their aspirations and ambitions. He should ensure personal as well as group competence. He is personally responsible to guide the project to ensure that all legal, ethical, contractual and compliance based requirements are met. The thumb rule is to never deviate from what is right and straight.

Resolve Conflicts and Contradictions

Projects have multiple stakeholders and the diversity increases if the projects are geographically spread. The competing interests of various stakeholders should be considered and should be balanced. In a global scenario, the project managers face cultural diversity and should exercise sensitivity to other groups, their social customs, and their means of doing business. This diversity of stakeholders, their expectations and their background will open possibility for conflict and the project manager should balance this situation by having appropriate negotiation and resolution via discussion and balancing of interests. In a similar way, he should identify the qualities necessary to succeed in a cross-cultural scenario and ensure that the communication mechanism accommodates those qualities.

Conclusion

In summary, a Project Manager should protect the interests of the stakeholders, should balance their interests, should stick to what is right for the project and what is ethically and legally correct should be humane to support the requirements of the team and should ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to cater to the larger environment in which projects are set. His willingness to learn, the generosity to admit and the inclination to share with others will increase his personal competence and win respect from others.



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