

# EXPERT SERIES

The “Expert Series” is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions’ associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

## **A Convergence of Viewpoints Project managers and corporate leadership move closer together at last**

by Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin

In doing research on project management and organizational change, I’ve noticed that one factor is cited as critical for project success, in every kind of project, across industries. Whether it’s project management methodology that’s being implemented, or a customer relationship management application, or ERP, or knowledge management, or a new HR program ... whether it’s software, hardware, or “peopleware” ... executive backing and involvement is the one factor that is always key.

The mystery is why there’s so much difficulty in getting corporate executives to notice and support initiatives in their own companies that are (presumably) of benefit to the organization. I’ve come to the conclusion that business in general is suffering from the “Cool Hand Luke syndrome.”

### **COMMUNICATION FAILURE**

Those of you in the upper age brackets will recognize that allusion at once, but for younger readers: In a 1967 Paul Newman film, *Cool Hand Luke*, the prison warden tells his rebellious captive: “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” This scene works on many levels to explain how Cool Hand Luke syndrome makes it impossible for a company to act as a unified whole.

For one thing, to the executive (warden), “communication” is entirely a one-way street: he gives orders and his prisoners (whoops, I meant *employees*) obey them, no matter how counterproductive the orders may be. He may contradict himself day in and day out, and no one can dare to point it out. Most of us who have worked in large companies have run into executives like this: the fact that they generally create terrible places to work and eventually impact the company’s bottom line in a negative manner doesn’t seem to keep them from continuing to rise to the top of the heap.

On the other hand, the increasingly stubborn employee, tired of digging the ditch only to have to refill the ditch and be told the next day to dig it again, makes very poor receiver of communication. Plus, since communicating is the human thing to do, he or she will find some way to communicate displeasure. Often this is a nonverbal “communication”: lessening productivity, a sour attitude, mistakes, poor quality, and so on. Like Luke himself, they may run away from the company entirely, communicating with their feet.

The great psychologist Carl Rogers pointed out decades ago that inequality of power between people makes real communication almost impossible. When one level of the organization talks, and the other is supposed to only listen and agree, very little actual communication takes place. The more distance between the top of the org chart and the bottom, the greater the likelihood that organizational improvement initiatives will die in the swamp of miscommunication that lies in between. Studies have shown that, ironically, the top leaders of a typical organization often exist in an information-free zone, since few people are willing to tell them bad news or alert them to potential problems.

### **Tips for Presenting Projects to Executives**

- Be brief and stick to the point
- Break up long chunks of written text
- Use appropriate language for your audience
- Avoid rambling off on extended acronym and jargon-fueled tangents
- If you must use jargon, make sure it is business, not technical, jargon
- If you are unsure about it, try your “pitch” out on a non-techie first.

**Source: Karl Cushing, Speech therapy, Computer Weekly, 19 Sep. 2002.**

# EXPERT SERIES

**On the other hand...** While a hierarchical organizational structure can, in effect, put top leadership in what amounts to a soundproof room, the people in the trenches also bear some responsibility for the communication failure between the project level and the executive level. Who has not listened to a group of project managers, gathered in a hallway at a conference, complaining bitterly that their top brass “doesn’t understand” project management, doesn’t appreciate what a great a contribution project managers are making, and often detailing with sarcastic merriment, their personal “communication” tactics, which range from the merely snide to sabotage ... a word that, literally translated, means “throwing a shoe in the machinery to jam it up.” (Now there’s an example of “communicating with your feet”!)

**Worlds apart.** In seeking to understand the gap between project personnel and executive leadership, it may help to examine the cultural context that produces a CEO vs. the culture of project managers. While project managers take great pride in being practitioners of a specialty, according to a study of MBA graduates conducted in 1997 by Stanford University, top leaders must be “jacks-of-all-trades.” Coming out of technical specialties such as engineering and computer science, as most project managers still do, PMs tend to have a detail-oriented focus, while it’s to the CEO’s advantage to think big. Project managers minimize and mitigate risks; corporate leaders take them. Instead of open-ended questions (Why do we do it this way?), project managers have a tendency to get stuck in the minutiae of how things get done.

**That’s history!** Luckily for all of us, the picture we’ve just painted is one that is beginning to fade. Bureaucratic organizations with rigid walls between functions; executives who lead in the military model of command and control; and workers who think of themselves as merely cogs in a machine without personal responsibility for anything beyond their job description—all these features of corporate life, so prevalent in the 20th century, seem outmoded in the 21st.

The change is coming from both ends of the organization. On one hand, many top business leaders today realize that flatter organizations with more entrepreneurial employees make good competitive sense. Software developments that allow communication through and around the old organizational levels and boundaries are facilitating easier access. Listening skills are coming to be more highly valued than in the past. The knowledge economy has upped the value of employees at every level of the organization. Savvy executives realize that the tacit knowledge possessed by project managers and their teams is a corporate asset.

Meanwhile, many courses have cropped up on the university level, designed to train engineers and other technically-minded people to be full participants in corporate life. At Stanford, a program that provides engineering students with courses on entrepreneurship and places them in summer jobs with startups has met with rave reviews. Thomas H. Byers, the consulting professor who directs the Technology Ventures Co-op program, in a recent speech to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, noted two lists of desirable intellectual skills that engineers will need in the 21st century— one compiled by the National Science Foundation and the other by the Boeing Company. The lists included many skills typically thought to be the province of entrepreneurs and other corporate leaders: the ability to manage complexity and uncertainty; the ability to think critically and creatively as well as independently and cooperatively; the self-confidence to adapt to rapid/major change; and a profound understanding of teamwork.

OVERCOMING THE GAP between executive and project manager differences in outlook and metrics requires better communication skills from both parties. A project is a decision to invest business resources, and the whole business will benefit when all the players contribute to that decision.

---

Excerpted from Project Management Best Practices Report, October 2002. Content reviewed July, 2010.