

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.

What Makes a Good Project Manager

by Debbie Bigelow Crawford, PMP

MANY OF US HAVE FALLEN INTO THE PROFESSION OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT. Now that we're here, what does it take to make us one of the best? Obviously, a good project manager (PM) possesses skills, talent, and breadth of experience -- but what makes a good PM one of the best?

Some say the best project managers exhibit extraordinary energy levels, phenomenal political skills, and an absolute obsession with results. While I agree these characteristics are probably the most common, they are only the first identifiers...there are more...lots more.

From recent articles and highlights of successful projects, there appears to be some common threads woven into the personalities of successful PMs:

- » Love of their work ... and embracing the challenges
- » Clear vision ... and communicating this vision
- » Strong team building skills...and setting positive tones
- » Structure and alignment...creating the environment and direction
- » Strong interpersonal skills...listening to and leading their teams
- » Discipline...completing each phase of the project properly
- » Communication skills...knowing when and to whom to communicate

Frank Toney reports in the newsletter Project Management Best Practices Report that a study of The Top 500 Project Management Benchmarking Forum identified traits of a best practice project manager. According to the study, the best PMs:

- » are recognized by stakeholders as the single most important factor in project
- » goal achievement
- » are truthful in all dealings and relationships
- » exhibit eagerness to organize and lead groups
- » exhibit evidence of a strong desire for goal achievement
- » are even-tempered
- » have faith that the future will have a positive outcome
- » have confidence their personal performance will result in a positive outcome

These champions bring a can-do structure and discipline to organizations, helping them transform informal processes into a project management culture and force. A recent article in Compuworld featured a story of a senior vice president of a Fortune 500 organization. This VP's project management staff initially resisted his program of discipline, structure, tools, training, and leadership. They were accustomed to mediocrity. But as his staff became more effective at their jobs, they realized his way was better. In fact, he and his team of 25 were able to reduce the project cycle time 15% to 25% and cut personnel expenses by 10% per year while taking on bigger and more complex projects.

How did he do this? He encouraged his team to be innovative, to translate business processes into logical processes, to be structured, and to have discipline. He did not allow shortcuts. He knew that taking time on the front end of a project would save time on the back end. (How many of us have been in positions where we allowed our deadlines to dictate how and when to move forward? How many of us, despite the fact that we knew we had not planned or defined the requirements adequately, moved into our next phase? I know I've been guilty..and I've paid the price.)

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Structure in a project starts from understanding the objectives of the project. A manager of a structural design firm was recently put on a 12-month project, which was floundering. The project team had lost focus. This manager's approach was to create a visual feedback mechanism. He grabbed a conference room, declared it their home, and displayed everything that was relevant on the walls. Having everything in front of this team forced them to look at it. It created clarity and aligned everyone in the same direction. Personal accountability was established, as was consistency and trust. The project was brought in four days ahead of schedule at a quality level above standard.

Can you learn to be a better project manager. In PMI's Project Management Handbook Barry Posner and James Kouzes say yes: job experiences in particular, but also relationships, formal education, and training, can all help you develop the skills and traits necessary to be one of the best. Evaluate your own experiences after each project and learn from those lessons; meet with admired and successful project managers and learn from them. And study lessons learned from histories of previous projects by reading or by participating in classes and workshops based on these best practices.

Good ...no, the best project managers assume responsibility for their actions. They realize that they are totally accountable for project (and personal) success or failure. Once they understand what it takes to be the best, they do whatever they can to assure success. How do you measure?

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