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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 is Competence?

*Research on project manager competency has yielded some surprising results,
says Dr. Frank Toney of the Executive Initiative Institute*

by Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin

“HE’S REALLY GOOD AT WHAT HE DOES. BUT WHAT A JERK!” How many times have you heard those two sentences linked, usually in a tone of extreme frustration? Over the years it’s been a staple of American business that people who excel in their jobs don’t have to be liked, as long as they are productive. Now, it seems that tide is turning. In his new book, *The Superior Project Manager*, Dr. Frank Toney discusses what he considers the foundation elements of competency: old-fashioned virtues like truthfulness, humility, and keeping your word. We discussed the application of these ideas to project manager competence.

BPR: It seems like project managers without people skills are like carpenters who don’t understand the law of gravity: they have all the right tools but can’t make them work.

Toney: That’s exactly right! In our education we tend to emphasize things like tools and templates. Project managers tend to be technical people, so we love those things. We want project management to be a checklist profession: if you got through the certification process and checked off WBS, risk analysis, role delineation, made the numbers add up, then you’ve succeeded. According to research, this is not true, but it is a particular trap that technical people fall into.

Research shows that when a project fails, it’s rarely because the Gantt chart wasn’t done. It’s because of politics, personality, and interpersonal issues.

BPR: Speaking of politics: A recent survey by Office Team of Menlo Park, Calif., discovered that 70% of corporate employees believe that workplace politics are on the rise. What does this mean for project managers?

Toney: Well, they’re right. Another study I read recently asked: Have you ever worked for or with a manager who you considered to be incompetent, and 90% of the respondents said yes. That tells you something about the role politics plays in our promotions ... and it also means it’s a fact of life that we are surrounded with people who have interests other than the best interests of the project.

Tom Ingram (*How to Turn Computer Problems into Competitive Advantage*, PMI, 1998) found that one-third of projects fail because of political and ethical issues. And there’s global research that shows about half those people who return from an overseas assignment with their task incomplete, failed in their mission for reasons that have nothing to do with technical competency. Very often the reason they fail is because of forbidden topics—some of which we can’t even teach about without being politically incorrect—problems of race, sexuality, manners, religious misunderstandings, dress and language. All these huge cultural, political, religious, and social issues are not only a problem in international business. At home they are simply more subtle.

Yet when people go out and hire a project management training firm, they rarely ask for a focus on political issues. Occasionally you find a firm like Asea Brown Boveri of Sweden; their project management curriculum includes several courses that deal with politics, leadership and culture.

BPR: Interesting that you cite a Swedish firm with an international presence as an example.

Toney: Yes, ABB is often cited as having forward-looking processes in place and perhaps it’s because they have had to overcome the cultural competency issue. They build big electric generating plants in developing

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countries, and their project managers are engineers, so over time they have learned the biggest problems these people have are on the human side of the ledger. They've developed a certain wisdom in this area. For instance, who do you think is the first person they choose for a team being assigned to a foreign locale? It's not the engineer or the PM. It's the cook. They found that food is one of the key elements that makes people happy on these remote projects.

I was also impressed by the way some of these Scandinavian companies get feedback from everybody ... it's an example of how the differences in nationalities show up in business practices. I went to a mine in Sweden with some top executives. There was a high school kid working there part time ... after the vice president gave his opinion, this high school kid pipes up and gives his and they all listened respectfully. You simply wouldn't find that in most cases in the U.S.

BPR: You have been involved in research into project management competencies for a number of years now. Apart from cultural and political competence, what's important for project managers?

Toney: What our research tends to show is that there are three big areas:

- 1) Just plain knowing how... the checklist of technical project management skills.
- 2) Character: being truthful, keeping commitments. This is the foundation.
- 3) Professionalism. These include learned behaviors related to human relationships, culture, marketing skills, basic engineering skills, things you can learn in school or on the job. Strategy, goal achievement skills, efficiency and effectiveness. The kind of people skills you learn in HR classes. Decision making skills.

The first category of skills is very much inward-looking-it pertains to the inner workings of the project, but this third category is more about understanding and interacting with the environment. This is where technical people get in trouble. They run the project very well, thinking that is all success requires: If I do a good job with my checklist of activities, I will be successful in this job.

BPR: How do you go about developing metrics on soft skill competencies?

Toney: Well, truthfulness is easy it's binary: yes or no. In terms of ethical values, when they fail it is also easy to observe. But companies tend to just talk about it: at a defense contractor I audited some big projects for, one of the VPs had a plaque on his desk that said Be Truthful ... and I remarked that my research showed that to be a top competency. He replied that truthfulness was one of the main values of the company. But on their checklist of project manager performance, this was never mentioned.

According to that checklist, you could be a felon and a liar and still be a top performer! You get what you ask for, what you reward for. That said, it's easier to set high standards and encourage people than it is to measure compliance and punish shortfalls. There are two informal ways to do this.

The first is mentoring. What happens when you put a new employee in a production environment with the worst employee on the plant floor? Their performance rises to that level and no higher. Likewise if people are teamed with high achievers, they rise to that level of excellence. In project management, we talk about the value of mentors, but it's difficult to do, since the mentors we want are the best people we have. Taking them off their own tasks to help other people could impede progress, so it's a hard sell in a corporate or political setting. Everyone is striving to get promoted and they look on each other as competitors. But at least you can set high standards for achievement and behavior.

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The second is networking-helping other people even when you expect to nothing in return. This helps build stronger and stronger teams over the years.

BPR: So can you give us a sketch of the perfect project manager?

Toney: No, because there is no particular personality that makes a good project manager ... it's a learned profession and anyone who has to do it, can learn how. But there are people who enjoy doing projects and the characteristics they share are: they are achievement oriented-they like to take classes, get certificates. They like projects because there's a conclusion and results. They also tend to be power-oriented in the sense that they desire to lead. They're the type who likes to organize groups-this is not a negative term at all.

They also tend to have a service attitude, and take a facilitative approach to leadership. They delegate more and accumulate a higher quality of personnel around them; they generate trust.

Intelligence, surprisingly, doesn't seem to be all that helpful. Most superior intellects have trouble working in groups. Most CEOs, in fact, are of just above average intelligence.

Then there's self-confidence. I just read the most fascinating research on positive thinking, something motivation speakers have been blabbing about for years, but this study by Barbara Fredrickson of the University of Michigan has attached empirical values to positive attitude. She found that if you have one negative person on the team they will destroy the output of the team.

BPR: But is positivism a competency that one can learn?

Toney: There are methods of doing that, which include meditating (or praying if you're religious). It's good for people just to sit and think about relaxing. Actors know you can pretend you are happy... a smile has a physiological effect that releases tension, even when you fake it. All this is part of emotional stability, which is a factor in performance. People who have terrible tempers burn themselves out and anger is such a devastating emotion in a team setting.

Dr. Toney, who says that his "mission in life is helping individual project managers improve their life and improve their careers" stresses that the project management skills, which "add predictability and structure" to work, are not overshadowed by these softer skills. Instead these three areas form a new project management triangle, working together to give people satisfaction and success in their chosen career.

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