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# Emerging Trends in Project Management

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## Introduction

The technical aspects of managing projects notwithstanding, project managers are increasingly asked to lead the organization in transformative ways. Since project managers often interact across the entire spectrum of departments within corporations and are not stuck in a certain corporate "silo," they are often exposed to emerging trends within the industry that other functional or departmental managers are not. Among the trends that project managers have noticed are:

- An increased emphasis on project management soft skills
- Viewing the project management office (PMO) as a potential profit center (vs. a cost center)
- Aggressively planning sustainability into projects and an increased emphasis on corporate social responsibility.

## Increased Emphasis on Project Management Soft Skills

There is a fine line between art and science in certain professions. A brilliant surgeon will never reach full potential if he or she has an awful bedside manner. As the Project Management Professional (PMP) credential becomes more and more important, and as more and more project managers obtain the PMP credential, it is no longer enough to master only the science of project management. Earning the PMP credential demonstrates that a project manager understands the "hard skills" of project management: earned value management, development of the work breakdown structure, project schedule, project budget, and risk management plan. However, there is another set of skills a project manager must master to reach his or her full potential: "soft skills," such as interpersonal communication, leadership, negotiation skills, influencing, and personnel management. Soft skills are much more art than science. Companies that invest in the development of their project managers' set of soft skills are the ones that have the greatest chance of achieving project success.

## Communication

Among the most difficult skills for a project manager to master is communication. The ability to plan and build a communication management plan is a hard skill that doesn't require finesse. Soft skills come into play when the project manager has to have difficult conversations, negotiate with the sponsor or stakeholders, or to detail subpar performance to a member of a project team. A 2012 study by Brandeis University [1] cited that among the top ten reasons why projects fail is that there is inadequate communication within a project or among the project teams. That same study rated the soft skill of communication, including progress tracking and reporting, as more than two times more responsible for failure or success than the hard skill set of creating the communication management plan. Spending time communicating with your team members in a one-on-one setting

demonstrates to them that they are important to the team. Communication ties directly back to the issue of employees leaving their jobs because they feel like their leaders don't respect them and their talents. Show them otherwise by taking some time to communicate directly. Many project managers live in the comfortable world of being able to make a plan, monitor the plan, and control costs, timelines, and scope. But the ones who will find the greatest success in the next decade will be those who can communicate clearly, influence stakeholders, and display team leadership.

## Leadership

Leadership within teams has long been something of a mystery. As a project manager, the number one resource that you have is your project team. What is holding you back from taking care of them? Do you have the necessary leadership skills to rally the team and deliver the big project on time and on budget? What constitutes a good leader is as difficult to define as what makes someone more prone to like chocolate ice cream over vanilla. Different people respond to different styles of leadership; the trick is to adapt your leadership style to the people on your team. If you are a project manager who has decided that your team has to adapt to you, then you are in for a rude awakening. Today's employees are not the employees of yesterday; those employees who were hired by a large, respectable company and stayed at a job for 35 years, despite little personal satisfaction, simply because they were happy to have a job. The U.S. Department of Labor has reported that the average 18-to-38-year-old stays at a job an average of four years. Two million employees quit their jobs every single month in the U.S. Alan Hall of *Forbes Magazine* has stated that this is purely a leadership issue [2]. Many employees do not feel that they are respected by their bosses. They also feel like they are not paid what they are worth, and that when the team achieves success, they are not included in the rewards for those successes. Many employees are also convinced that leaders within their organization are not invested in their personal development and don't underwrite honest mistakes. This all adds up to a growing sense within teams and organizations that those who are supposed to lead are only looking out for themselves, not for the health of the team or individual employees.

## Retaining Team Members

How can the leadership gap be bridged and how can project managers hold onto their best and brightest? The answer is in inspiring, coaching, and mentoring your project team members. Inspiring your team members is not a difficult task, if you get the right people on your team to begin with. This can be difficult if you are in a weak matrix organization that assigns team members to your team with little to no input from you. But if you are in a project-oriented organization or a strong matrix that allows you to have full or nearly full autonomy over hiring project team members, then the inspiration question begins and ends with you as the project manager. Ensure that you are hiring people who are in line with your organizational and project goals. Solicit input from those who are already serving on your team and ask for their feedback on the hiring process. Inspiring team members who already buy into the project and your organizational goals is much more easily accomplished than motivating someone who is only inspired twice a month: on the 1st and 15th.

## Coaching and Communicating

The ability to effectively coach your team members is also important to the leadership dynamic within your team. The process of coaching the members of your team is a way to maintain constant communication, set expectations, and create a roadmap for success for your team members. Coaching is all about achieving project objectives and leading your team to a predetermined outcome. In a coaching relationship, the coach is set on improving performance in a directive style and assumes responsibility for the outcome. Just like a football coach makes a game plan and then directs team members how to perform on the field, the project manager makes

the project management plan and directs project members on how to work to the plan. An effective coaching strategy for your project team can raise performance and improve the chances for project success.

## Setting Expectations

Setting clear expectations for the members of your project team is another critical leadership task. It can be extremely frustrating for team members to constantly wonder whether or not they are meeting or failing to meet the project manager's expectations. While ground rules for a project are addressed in a kickoff meeting, individual duties and deliverables are not. Taking the time to address the senior members of your project team individually and setting the expectation that they demonstrate leadership will create a cascading effect within your team. You are responsible to set their roadmap and lead them, and they, in turn, are responsible for those who report to them.

## Mentoring

Developing a mentoring program within your team is one way that project managers can professionally develop their team members. Senior members of the team should be receptive to taking a junior member of the team "under their wing" and sharing success secrets. New team members should be encouraged to find a more senior member of the team with whom they would like to establish a mentor-mentee relationship. The agreement between the two team members must be mutual; there can be no mentoring or development if one of the parties is not interested. The sharing of a mentoring relationship between team members leads to greater team success by building camaraderie and trust within the team. The payoff for the junior members is receiving guidance and career advice, which strengthens their commitment to the team and to the project. The payoff for the project manager and leadership team is that committed team members will deliver better results. Forward-looking companies embrace and commit to developing project management soft skills in their project managers, which in turn reduces turnover and builds cohesive project teams.

## The PMO as a Profit Center

When times get tight, one of the first things that companies do is look at where to cut costs and reduce staff. A tempting target for many companies is the PMO. This natural predilection to focus the budget slashing cross-hairs on the PMO is caused by several factors. Among those factors could be a simple misunderstanding of what the PMO does, viewing the PMO only as a cost center or as a natural extension of project funding cutbacks and the elimination of projects.

In order for PMO directors to spare their departments from the budget axe, it is increasingly important to transform the PMO into a profit center for the company. It may seem counterintuitive that a center within a company that consumes resources can be transformed into a revenue-generating center, but it can be done. The PMO has unique skills and organizational knowledge that have been honed by years of managing cross-departmental projects. When the slashing begins, the PMO director can sell his department as the go-to subject matter experts (SMEs) who can replace all those high-priced consultants that were let go in the name of budget savings.

The PMO can provide functional and departmental managers with manpower and can generate revenue by assigning these labor costs out to the other departments. It is more affordable, in almost every instance, to use in-house SMEs than to hire an outside consultant or consulting firm. Transferring costs from one department to

the revenue stream of another department can be seen as accounting voodoo. However, the real savings and revenue generation will be realized when the PMO must quickly reassemble a team to tackle a high-priority, high-profit project opportunity. Keeping the PMO staff and using them as in-house consultants for other functional departments keeps the expertise that you have developed, generates revenue for the PMO, and maximizes the opportunity to quickly seize the initiative when projects require reactivation of a robust PMO.

## Social Responsibility and Planning for Sustainability in Projects

### Sustainability

Creating value through sustainability has become increasingly important in business today, and its importance will continue to grow in the future. Worldwide, as companies and societies become more attuned to the necessity of reducing waste, increasing recycled content, and integrating sustainability into the supply chain, the importance of planning sustainability into projects will get increased focus. Sustainability in project management can be viewed as equalizing the business benefits of your project with the environmental and societal impacts that the project will have. In a nutshell, it is being able to meet today's project needs while securing the ability to meet the needs of the future.

Many organizations are beginning to plan sustainability into their projects in a variety of different ways. Whether planning sustainability on the front end of a project (materiel procurements) or on the back end (reducing landfill waste), you must give careful consideration when creating the project management plan. Sustainability doesn't happen by accident; it must be a planning and organizational priority for its benefits to be fully realized. It may seem somewhat daunting to begin the process of planning sustainability into your projects, but the introduction of the concept can begin incrementally and be expanded as the process takes root. The initial step in introducing sustainability is to benchmark where the organization currently sits and to establish achievable goals for increasing sustainability and reducing waste. Setting goals can be accomplished by carefully planning ways to save energy on projects, planning procurements to include products or components that are manufactured in an environmentally conscious manner, and by reducing the amount of solid waste generated by the project.

Since more organizations and businesses are trying to increase sustainability, it stands to reason that they will look at doing business with those who share those values. The United States Department of Defense has strongly encouraged the implementation of "green" procurements and has been aggressively funding programs and projects that are designed to reduce waste and increase renewable energy initiatives. Embracing and understanding the concept of sustainability will enable your project team and your organization to reap the benefits of the growing drive toward sustainability-based project management. Look at sustainability as an opportunity to help your organization's bottom line.

### Social Responsibility

Along with sustainability, there is an emerging trend to conduct business in a socially responsible manner. There has been ever increasing scrutiny placed on companies that exploit foreign workers, waste the natural resources of under-regulated countries, or damage the environment through negligence or in the name of increased profit. In terms of project management, corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as project planning to en-

sure that profits are not generated through cost savings that result from the maltreatment of workers or by channeling business to countries that do not enforce accepted environmental standards. Like sustainability, CSR can have a positive impact on the bottom line, but it can have a highly negative impact if ignored. Sacrificing your organization's reputation or failing to secure business because your organization does not embrace these emerging trends will leave your project team or organization doing damage control, instead of delivering projects.

## Footnotes

- 1 Marando, Anne. "Balancing Project Management Hard Skills and Soft Skills." February 2012. [http://projectmgmt.brandeis.edu/downloads/BRU\\_MSMPP\\_WP\\_Feb2012\\_Balancing\\_Project\\_Management.pdf](http://projectmgmt.brandeis.edu/downloads/BRU_MSMPP_WP_Feb2012_Balancing_Project_Management.pdf)
- 2 Hall, Alan. "'I'm Outta Here!' Why 2 Million Americans Quit Every Month (And 5 Steps to Turn the Epidemic Around)." *Forbes Magazine*, 11 March, 2013. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/alan-hall/2013/03/11/im-outta-here-why-2-million-americans-quit-every-month-and-5-steps-to-turn-the-epidemic-around/>

## Summary

For organizations that want to get the most out of their PMOs and project managers, and lead the way in the future, embracing these important trends is essential. Spending time on the front end to train project managers on the soft skills of project management will pay dividends on the back end through the development of fully committed project teams. Thinking of the PMO as a potential profit center and an internal resource to be tapped can save your organization time and money. Implementing sustainability into your projects and being conscientious about the social impacts of your projects will become increasingly important over the next several years. Opening your mind to these emerging trends will open your door to new opportunities.

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## About the Author

Dan Stober is a PMP-certified project manager with over ten years of experience managing projects. His experience includes managing projects for the U.S. government in the United States, Middle East, and Europe.