

## Choosing Project Managers

### *Knowledge is Easier to Acquire than Changing Behavior*

Recently, a Sciforma client posed the following query:

*Which personality types make better project managers? Should companies screen for learning and listening styles? Is it better to hone natural ability occurring in some people (personality styles) rather than teaching technique to a person whose personality type may limit the results achieved even when following the techniques?*

Unfortunately, this is a dilemma that we face all too often. Especially in organizations that are just getting into formal project management, we tend to look for personnel that are already in the organization, to put into project management positions. It is somewhat rare to find among these resources, fully qualified people, with skills in both leadership & management, and project management.

Having been responsible for building project management operations in several organizations, and consulting for others, I can try to respond to her perceptive questions, based on experience. I can add to that my academic prospective, based on a degree concentration on Behavioral Science in Business.

### **Can We Say That Project Managers are Born, not Made?**

This may sound like a cliché, but this is a valid short answer. If all you have is a minute to delve into this subject, you can just take away the advice that, given the choice of taking someone with project management skills or a leadership personality, I would opt for the latter.

Of course, it's not that easy. Obviously, neither capability, in the absence of the other, is likely to produce the desired results. But I would like to propose that starting with Choice B (below) will provide the better platform to build upon. Let's look more closely at these two options.

### **Choice A – Has PM Skills – Lacks PM Personality**

It is not that difficult to acquire PM skills. For the most part, the process of project management consists of a set of fairly natural functions. The biggest challenge is changing the mindset of individuals who have focused on operations functions, and getting them to switch gears to a projects mode.

After all, what is so difficult in the PM process? To develop a project charter – defining objectives and scope, considering strategies to achieve the objectives, setting the ground rules – aren't these fairly natural management functions? Building schedules and budgets, managing the workforce, tracking progress, reporting and communicating – these should not be foreign to managers.

So, given that the PM candidate has some management experience, we can expect that this individual can acquire the skills necessary to adapt that experience to the projects arena. Furthermore, these skills can easily be acquired by someone who has not had managerial

experience. However, in this case, the jump to managing projects, especially in the absence of clear authority (a typical projects environment) is a greater leap.

## Choice B – Has Leadership Personality – Lacks PM Skills

If we accept the premise that PM skills can be acquired, then why not the converse? Why can't we take a candidate that has PM knowledge and skills and provide training in preferred methods for leading people? Actually, we do some of this. For instance, my seminars usually have a component directed at project communications. We can do much to raise awareness of the issues associated with leading a project team, especially some of the subtle challenges of managing the work of people who report to other managers.

But this is more than a training issue. It is not knowledge that we are trying to add to, but personalities that we are trying to change. That just isn't going to happen in a classroom. Personalities do change, over time. When Jack Welsh rose to the chair of the General Electric Company, in the 1980's (I was working at GE at the time), the consensus was that he was brutal manager, who tossed people out of meetings and indiscriminately closed facilities and chopped payrolls. Yet he went on to be recognized as one of the best corporate managers in recent times. But this didn't happen overnight, and it didn't come about from formal training. Furthermore, he had position power to hold on to the reins while waiting for people to warm to his style. The typical project manager does not have this and can only lead successfully because the team is willing to accept his leadership.

## Sensitivity Training

Many large corporations offer something called sensitivity training (a.k.a. behavior modification). Either on their corporate development campuses or through external personal development centers, they offer (or more likely "elect") selected personnel to have their behavior "adjusted".

Why would knowledgeable people in responsible positions need behavior modification? Because all too often, these otherwise capable individuals act in such ways as to defeat their very good intentions. There are numerous aspects to such behavior, many of which most of us are guilty of from time to time. Aggressiveness, deceitfulness, rudeness, and lack of respect are some of the more egregious characteristics to be treated. Sometimes the transgressions are more subtle, such as lack of communication, favoritism, denial, etc.

The continual exhibition of such behavior, in critical social business situations, such as leading people in projects, can have a very deleterious effect on the team and the project results. Certainly these are not personality characteristics that we seek in project managers.

We postulated earlier that it should not be too difficult to build expertise in the project management processes and skills via training. The same does not hold for behavior modification. Here, we are trying to change practices and personalities, rather than to add to a person's knowledge and skills. There is evidence that sensitivity training has a very short half-life. Typically, busy executives go off for a week at the "campus" for an intense look at themselves. They are shocked at what they see. They have every intention to correct the offensive behavior.

The next week, they go back to the pressures of the job and as soon as the first crisis hits, they are back to square one. It would be much easier to quit smoking.

## Which Choice is Best?

What should be apparent here is that given the choice of training to add to one's knowledge and abilities, or to change behavior, that we would much prefer to do the former. The latter is likely to fail.

## Who to Select for PM Training

There is a quantum difference between knowledge for project management and aptitude for project management. We need to select candidates for project management positions, based first on their leadership qualities. Then we advance the selection process to the aptitude issue. The candidates have to believe in the principles of project management. The candidates have to be excited about the challenges of managing projects and sincere in their belief that implementing a sound project management capability is important to achieving sound project results. The candidates have to recognize that a sound project management process supported by computer-based tools can only be effective if applied by a knowledgeable team, working together to develop, communicate and maintain good plans. This, as opposed to just publishing bad data that has been sliced and diced so as to produce razzle-dazzle presentations consisting of wishful thinking and outright lies. Lastly, the candidates have to be willing to take the time to acquire the missing project management skills.

## Making Project Management Work

Regardless of who is selected to be project managers, the process will have to have clear and visible support from senior management. For this we look for the following:

- A clear statement that project management is a “way of life” in the organization, and that support for project management is a “condition of employment”.
- The recognition that we can't take shortcuts with project management – that we cannot treat it casually and unprofessionally and still have it work.
- Acknowledgement of project management in the HR system, via recognition of project management responsibilities in position descriptions, and recognition for superior project performance via rewards and career path incentives.
- Recognition of the importance of project success to the vitality and future of the enterprise.

Assuming that you don't have a fistful of brilliant leaders with a full deck of project management skills, here's what to look for:

- The candidate should have abundant leadership and social skills
- The candidate should have a good appreciation for the importance of projects to the viability of the enterprise

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- The candidate should have a positive attitude toward the process and methods of project management and the willingness to learn the skills necessary to lead teams in the execution of successful projects.
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Mr. Levine is the leading consultant to the project management software industry and is recognized as the leading expert in tools for project management. He has been Adjunct Professor of Project Management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Boston University. He has conducted project management public seminars for ASCE, AMA, IBM, and PMI.

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