



# Project Management for Development Organizations

Doing the Right Projects,  
Doing the Projects Right

## The Skills of a Project Manager

### Managerial Skills

The evolution of development projects has changed the skills required of project managers. Not long ago the emphasis was placed on technical skills and project managers were hired by the experience and proficiency in the technical area the project was involved in. In the last years the nature of development projects has changed considerably, projects are not just one-dimensional approaches focused on a single solution. Development projects need to use multi-dimensional methods that include different approaches; these may include rights based, gender, and partnership.

Project teams involve more and more non-technical staff, and behavioral skills became equally important as technical skills. In this new environment, to be an effective project manager, may require having an understanding of general management rather than being a technical expert. Projects are becoming more complex that it is simply no longer possible for the project manager to remain a technical expert in all aspects of the project. Project managers need to spend more of their time

planning, organizing, directing and controlling progress rather than providing technical direction.

Project management is both a science and an art; it's a science because it requires the use of quantitative analysis such as charts, graphs, financial data; and an art because it deals with qualitative analysis such as negotiating, conflict resolution, political, interpersonal and organizational factors.

In order to perform the functions of management and to assume multiple roles, project managers must be skilled in both the science and the art of project management. There are five managerial skills that are essential to successful management: technical, problem solving, communicating, negotiating and conceptual skills:

### **Technical Skills**

The project manager must have the skills to use management techniques, procedures and tools. She must know how to interpret a budget report, know how to read a statistical analysis of a project baseline data, and understand the correct application of the different management methodologies. In addition to the above the project manager is expected to have skills in the effective use of information and communication technology to help her be more effective in her work.

Technical skills are related to working with processes and tools. They refer to using specialized knowledge and experience related to project management and the specific methodologies of the project for implementing project activities. These skills are necessary to communicate effectively with the project team, to assess risks, and to make trade-offs between cost, schedule, time and quality issues.

Since project managers do not do the actual work of the project, they do not need the same technical skill level as the people performing the work. This is not to say that the project manager doesn't need a level of technical expertise, the more expertise the project manager has in the technical area of the project, the greater his effectiveness in managing the project. Technical expertise is essential to identify potential problems and increases the ability of the project manager to integrate all aspects of the project.

The project manager must maintain a general perspective and not let her technical competence lead to micro-managing or do the project work. She must concentrate on managing the project, letting the project team members perform the technical work and limit her technical involvement to evaluating the work of the team.

### **Problem Solving Skills**

All projects are prone to encounter problems, problems that were not identified in the risk or scope of the project and that will need to be managed accordingly. Problem solving requires a good definition of the problem that is detected early enough to allow time to respond. In many cases the original problem is a symptom or a larger problem.

Problem solving Skills make use of different techniques, and by using these techniques you can start to tackle problems which might otherwise seem huge, overwhelming and excessively complex. Techniques such as breaking problems down into manageable parts, identifying root causes of problems, analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities & threats, must be mastered in order to solve problems.

Additionally the project manager needs synthesis and analytical thinking skills. A project manager must be able to synthesize information and arrange disparate information into a meaningful whole. A project manager must be able to see patterns and derive meaning from distinct pieces of data. Analysis is the skill of breaking a whole into component parts, much like decomposing work into a WBS.

### **Negotiation Skills**

Project managers spend a large portion of their time negotiating for resources, equipment or other support, and if they do not have strong negotiating skills, their chances of being successful project managers are greatly reduced. A large part of the negotiation takes place within the organization to get the resources the project needs, resources that are being requested by other project managers.

Negotiation is the process of obtaining mutually acceptable agreements with individuals or groups. Depending on the project structure and the level of authorization the project managers have to negotiate on behalf of the organization.

Negotiation usually includes making trade-offs when stakeholders request changes or modifications to the project and its resources, negotiation also includes dealing with vendors or consultants who are bidding for a specific good or service, this area may require the assistance of specialized staff such as representatives from the legal or the procurement department.

Negotiation skills also come handy when dealing with project beneficiaries and building agreements that will benefit both the project and the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries have in many instances other priorities and participating in the project activities may not be a main priority. The project manager must be able to find the best approach to develop common understanding and align the interest of the beneficiaries with those of the project.

### **Conceptual Skills**

Conceptual skills are the ability to coordinate and integrate all the projects efforts, it requires for the project manager to see the project as a whole and not just the sum of its parts, ability to understand how all the parts make a whole and how they all relate and depend on one another, and the ability to anticipate how a change in one part of the project will affect the entire project. The bigger and more complex is the project, the larger is the need for this type of skill. This skill helps the project manager keep a clear vision of the ultimate goal of the project and understand its relationships and dependencies with the project's environment.

Conceptual skills refer to the ability to see the "big picture." Project managers with good conceptual skills are well aware of how various elements of the project environment or ecosystem interrelate and influence one another. They understand relationships between projects, the development organization, the donor organization, the beneficiaries and its environment, and how changes in one part of the environment affect the project. Conceptual skills are necessary to appropriately deal with project politics and to acquire adequate support from top management.

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Although technical expertise is important, project managers do not need to be experts in the project's technical area. In fact, it is better that the project manager be a generalist rather than an expert. The reason is that experts tend to be very narrow in their views. Experts leading a project are less likely to consider any other view than their own. The tendency is for experts to believe their solution is the right one, and therefore the only choice. A generalist, on the other hand, is far more open to the views and suggestions of the team members. On balance, the results of projects led by a generalist tend to yield much better deliverables than a comparable project led by an expert.

The most proficient project management skills in the world will not compensate for a procedural blunder caused by not understanding the company culture, policies, personalities, or politics. The project manager negotiates with many people and needs to know their personalities, needs, and desires. The more he knows about the organization, the better equipped that the manager is to maneuver around pitfalls and get what is needed for the project. Every organization has a unique culture and individual divisions within an organization often have their own personalities. Understanding these cultures and personalities can help a project manager be more successful.

Interpersonal skills require understanding people, their attitudes, and human dynamics. They represent the ability of a project manager to work effectively as a project team leader and to build cooperative effort with the project members and all other groups with which the project team interacts. They are most critical for effective performance in a project environment. Major interpersonal skills include: communication, team building, leadership, coaching, motivating, decision making, delegating, training, directing, persuading/influencing, negotiating, and supporting those involved in the project.

The project manager must be sensitive to the cultural differences when dealing with diverse people and their opinions, values, and attitudes. This is particularly true for the international projects that consist of the people of diverse cultures. The good interpersonal abilities build trust and confidence between members of the project team and help create good relations and good working environment. The important interpersonal abilities required to handle projects are leadership; communication, behavior and negotiation:

## Leadership Skills

Leadership skills are essential for project managers because project managers must influence the behavior of others. Project managers require leadership skills for the simple reason that they accomplish their work through people who have faces and names. Leadership is the predominant contributor to the success of the project manager. In small projects, good leadership can succeed even in a climate of otherwise unskilled management. This skill gives the project manager the ability to articulate a clear vision and provide direction.

## Communication Skills

The second most important skill, and the one in which they will spend most of their time during the life of the project. Good communications skills include verbal and nonverbal communications that enable a project manager to convey project information in a way that it is received and understood by all project stakeholders.

The first essential skill is the ability to communicate. This skill is important in any endeavor but is absolutely crucial in project management. It has been estimated that project managers spend 90 percent of their time just communicating: with the project team, the customer, functional managers, and upper management.

Communication is only successful when both the sender and the receiver understand the same information as a result of the communication. By successfully getting your message across, you convey your thoughts and ideas effectively. When not successful, the thoughts and ideas that you send do not necessarily reflect your own, causing a communications breakdown and creating roadblocks that stand in the way of your goals – both personally and professionally.

## Behavioral Skills

Behavioral skills are the skills that give the project manager the ability to work with people, and the ability to motivate people involved in the project. Behavioral skills are also known as people skills and these skills are needed in development projects due to the large and varied number of people the project interfaces with.

Behavioral or people skills, it's the ability to build cooperation between the project team, other project stakeholders, and the

project organization. These skills involve communication, team building, leadership, influencing, understanding perceptions and attitudes, which help improve the morale of individuals and groups.

The behavioral skills include dealing with how a person relates to others. It means having good communication skills and knowing how to be articulate and how to present information. An element of communication skills is having good listening skills that make a project manager an active listener which makes the communication skills more effective.

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These series of articles focuses on concepts and practices related to development projects. It is our hope that the ideas and methodologies presented here prove useful to anyone who is engaged in managing projects in the broader development community, and helps bring sustainable benefits to the communities and beneficiaries who need it the most.

The Millennium Development Goals aim by 2015 to reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people.

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