



Think outside the triangle.

ethier

Challenging the Current Assumptions of Project Management

(Initially published as a 2-part article for PMI-SAC Professional Development Conference, Nov. 2011)

Many of today's Project Managers are forgetting the business aspects of the projects they are asked to deliver. They do not ask "WHY are we doing the project," "WHAT is the business case," and "WHAT is the basis of the ROI?" Many PMs are focused purely on the triple constraints - being on time / on budget / and meeting scope.

What Mistakes Are We Making with Project Managers?

With the rise of PMOs in organizations, we are starting to build a dependency on PMO checklists, templates and processes. These tools are beginning to replace thinking, leadership and creativity. PMs are becoming fixated on PMO processes versus the delivery of value.

The PM measures are all short-term – and we aren't measured on long-term adoption / sustainability and ROI. We tend not to measure or reward soft-skills, which can be the difference between success and failure on a project.

These technical, short-term measures have begun encouraging PMs to focus only on the short-term – which often has a negative impact on the organization – and projects fail to deliver their anticipated value.

We are starting to create a culture of "Technical PMs"

Technical PMs place an emphasis on the mechanics of project management – often at the expense of the critical business aspects of the project. They monitor the triple constraints and have strict compliance to the letter of scope. They do project management 'by the book,' taking an almost scientific approach to project management. They spend a lot of their time on project mechanics, completing templates and forms, tweaking the Gantt chart and not looking past the go-live date.

The focus of the Technical PM is really on the symptoms (the project) more than the root cause (what need the client is trying to solve). They aren't usually very flexible and can easily take the statements in a project charter literally. For example, I've heard one say, "Well, the business signed the charter, so it's not my problem if things have changed."

The Technical PM is an order taker, following the PMO project guidelines zealously – and rarely challenging the imposed guidelines. They respond to a stated business request instead of understanding the need and proposing a solution. Their world is driven by project delivery – not on value delivery.

I want more!

This is not what I am looking for when I hire a PM to join our firm. Yes, the PM must have the necessary skills to handle all of the technical aspects of project management – frankly I take this for granted. But I am looking for much more than this – which I will talk about next ...

Challenging the Current Assumptions of Project Management (continued)

In part one of this article, I described my concerns with the development of a culture of Technical PMs and the growing dependency on the PMOs to do all of our thinking.

In part two, I'd like to introduce what Ethier has termed the Holistic Project Manager and describe the qualities that define this highly evolved PM.

The Holistic PM

The Holistic PM embodies all of the technical skills required of a successful project manager. They know how to manage a project, define scope, meet timelines and deliver within a budget, however, the Holistic PM possesses five key attributes that the Technical PM does not:

Focus on Business Value

The Holistic PM views the project as a 'vehicle to deliver value.' They ask, "Why are we doing the project?" They want to understand the business case. They want to know the expected ROI. They define success in terms of business success versus project success.

Vision

The Holistic PM personifies big picture thinking and the leadership ability to (re)shape the project to exceed the sponsor's vision and deliver what the business needs. They focus on the 'intent,' on the business need, and how to best deliver the ROI. They anticipate – thinking, "This is what I can do," as opposed to simply responding to a stated desire.

Expert Negotiation and Communication Skills

They understand that **everything** is a negotiation. They are willing to renegotiate, to do the right thing to ensure that the team is successful. The Holistic PM is fluent in the language of business, speaking to steering committees and sponsors in their own terms. They understand the importance of empowering their teams to deliver results.

Change Management Skill

The Holistic PM is comfortable with ambiguity and is the champion of change. They consider all the stakeholders – and their multiple viewpoints – and work diligently to communicate and get the appropriate buy-in. The Holistic PM recognizes that the project does not end at the go-live date, that benefits only happen once the change has been fully adopted.

Emotional Intelligence

Peter Salovey, Yale psychologist and author of the term EQ (Emotional Quotient), states that, "IQ gets you hired, EQ gets you promoted." The Holistic PM possesses the required emotional intelligence to effectively manage people. They are self-aware, manage their own emotions and recognize the emotions in others. They have integrity and build lasting relationships while getting the work done.

Final Thoughts

There you have it – the qualities of the rare (and coveted) Holistic PM. The good news is that most PMs are capable of developing these traits – if they can move past the current market definition of what a 'good PM' needs to have. I encourage all PMs to take the time to do some self-evaluation and determine which skills need to be polished – we all need to do this regularly. As PMs evolve beyond the Technical PM definition, they become what businesses really need: a Holistic PM.

Sohail Thaker is a highly experienced project manager and Partner with Ethier, a Calgary-based consulting firm. Ethier delivers project-based consulting services for business and IT customers, blending people and technology to improve business.