Good Practices to Managing Projects Better

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Abstract

The XXI. century increased the value of projects in the life of companies. Our economic system has not become simpler, and the tasks that companies need to manage on a daily basis have been further complicated. Having a really good project manager has become a key issue for a project success, because without proper project management practice, teamwork cannot be effectively coordinated. What kind of person should be an effective project manager? What does a good project manager need to know nowadays? This study addresses these issues and attempts to summarize the characteristics of a good project manager.

Keywords*: project, project management, project culture, project based organisation.*

Introduction

There is no doubt that several factors can determine the success of projects. The project itself is a unique, one-off, non-repeatable process that has the exact purpose and expected results, works on a budget, needs to be completed on time, and has a certain amount of resources needed (Verzuh, 2008). We initiate the project because some task, challenge, or problem cannot be satisfactorily solved by the usual, well-proven management solutions of the management, so a novel and planned combination of the applied solutions is needed. By definition, project success is achieved when the project triangle is realised in the classic sense, meaning that the project is executed within the given budget, on time and in the required quality (Daróczi, 2011). But would that really be the success of a project? Do these three pillars really determine how to talk about project success? What else is important for project success? This study seeks to address these issues very briefly and concisely.

New types of projects and especially the XXI century work environment requires us to be extremely human-centered and to find the right project leader. Project success can only be achieved if the right set of cost, time and quality requirements are put in place at the same time, but there is also a factor that can play an exclusive role in their development. Project management has evolved because we need the coordinated and targeted work of people who, through their activities, can meet the project's goals and expectations (Görög, 2007). Project management nowadays

is not only about managing resources efficiently, but increasingly about working together effectively with people and organising harmonious and effective work together. Environmental changes and the increasing complexity of our economy have resulted in more and more projects having to be solved by businesses. However, a growing number of projects increasingly require people who understand the project, who, through their capabilities, can contribute to the success of the project, and there is a great need for those who know how to manage them effectively. Project management is really nice because we can never manage a project twice in the same way; tasks, problems and solutions are always different (Görög, 2007, 2013).

There are no standardised tools, no replicable models, we always have to make the best decision for the situation, which is not always easy to make. By applying solutions from many other disciplines, project management aims to broaden the choice of decision support tools. There is a peculiar shift in terms of project success, as while the success of the project was mostly dependent on budget or availability of resources, project management has become a major factor in the human factor, people's behaviour, people's relationship to each other, mentions it as a success factor. Great emphasis is placed on working together, being collaborative, communicating, managing the project team, or creating a supportive environment for the project. This branch of project management, which is largely dependent on the human factor for successful project implementation, is called emotional project management. Project management is no longer just about cost or resources, it is not just "hard", meaning difficult and quantifiable, measurable factors that are important to the success of a project, it is also about people's motivation, goals, commitment to the project, and it also makes the work of the project manager more interesting (Kotter, 2009).

It is often said that project management is now an art of dealing with people, as the individual motivation and desire of the people working in the project team must be maintained, since without the creation of a project supportive environment there is less chance of working together effectively. Performance ultimately depends on working ability and motivation, so it is very important to include people with the right skills in the project. By doing so, they can contribute to the success of the project or work continually, enthusiastically and motivatedly to deliver the results, otherwise the lack of these will reduce the drive to deliver the expected results. People are among the determinants of project success, but this is not just about the effectiveness of the project team (Varga, 2017). The team can contribute to project success if it has the right dynamics, that is, individuals with the right abilities work together in the project team and can work well together to achieve the goal. In addition, an important role is played by a project leader who can properly coordinate the work of these actors, has the necessary motivation, and has clear ideas on how to achieve project success by well managing its people (and thus the project). Generally speaking, a project manager should understand many things at the same time, so it is not enough to have just the right project knowledge (Varga, 2017).

The project manager must be a good person to be able to accept the team members more widely, to communicate well with them, and to develop the relationships between the stakeholders that will facilitate the most effective work. For even though the best plan is the best valued resource, if the project manager is not able to motivate his or her people enough and drive them to the right performance. This is a key issue for project success, as international studies clearly confirm that 7 out of 10 projects end up failing, and in most cases, approximately 70% is due to inadequate human factors (Mochal, 2009). This proportion must be improved and the role of the person in the project work must be emphasised. These findings were supported by organisations such as the Standish Group, Ernst and Young or the Wellington Group. In addition, domestic project management organisations have been studying factors influencing project success and have come to the same conclusion as international research (Ernst & Young, 2006 (PMI, 2017; Standish Group, 2018).

Material and Method

In this hands-on overview, we sought to map the professional experience of several project managers and to identify the skills needed in general to help project success. We have had professional interviews with project managers who are leading project specialists in large companies, including MOL, IBM or Stadler. Each of these project leaders had one important point in common: All project leaders ranked the human factor as the most important. In addition, the project managers emphasised that each of them had some specific principles that they would always like to keep under all circumstances. Therefore, in general it can be emphasised that all project managers in the project management profession should have certain principles and be loyal to them. We made interviews with 20 Hungarian project managers.

As a results of the interviews: the project leaders agreed that they had principles. These principles showed only minor differences. It was also surprising to us that these principles really do appear and that a summary list can be drawn up in which these project managers generally agree. The most important principles can be summarised as follows.

- always be honest with the project and board members,
- no need to escalate, but if you really need to, you have to,
- enable scope expansion if timing and budget are not compromised,
- keep project information up to date,
- be in constant contact with stakeholders,
- be able to handle the emotions of team members properly,
- ensure that all communications are initiated by the project manager and not be missed,
- involve everyone in the planning process,

- in addition to project tasks, opportunities for personal reconciliation should be sought,
- the interests of the external supplier must always be balanced with the interests of the project,
- credibility is extremely important in maintaining trust,
- be able to show that we understand what we are doing.

The project leaders also agreed that involvement is extremely important and should be strongly built on members' abilities. Because the power of the team really lies in the community, it is imperative to take advantage of the opportunities that this offers. Valuable ideas, suggestions, alternative solutions should not be wasted. To the question of involvement, one of the project leaders answered only that: Post it! This is a general tip. Efforts must be made to promote that everyone can contribute to the identification of risks and addictions. Conventional techniques may also be employed, e.g. the post it technique, which is real teamwork and really everyone's problem solving ability. However, post it does not only refer to technique, so it is not just traditional sticky notes to be placed on the flipchart. This also means that there must be an opportunity for stakeholders to be involved, whatever the factors influencing the project. Therefore not only involving people when there is a problem or identifying a risk, but practically anytime. Project Stakeholders can go beyond their traditional role and do more than just what is stated in the Activity Responsible Matrix (RACI) to achieve project success. RACI (be responsible for the given tasks!)[1] Assigning activities and tasks to stakeholders is essential for project success. Not only does the RACI matrix exist to define this, but many other matrices of this kind are known in the art (e.g., DACI matrix). However, whatever matrix you consider, each one has a very important project management function. They help you settle disputes with simplicity, mitigate and prevent conflicts, and help you clearly assign tasks. If the rules of the game are clear and precise, we can avoid misunderstandings, disputes, and, in particular, increased tension, resistance or feelings in the members of the project team that hinder the project work and its effectiveness.

The project leaders also agreed that **the project manager can only be interpreted in conjunction with the team.** The project manager is not a stand-alone player, though we call him a project manager (Varga, 2015). Without the team, the project manager would not be able to be interpreted, so the project manager himself can only perform his function through his project team. The key to a good project manager is to have a well-functioning project team, for which the project manager himself or herself takes specific and targeted steps. However, it is also important that the project managers take care of the interrelated and interdependent tasks. An important aspect is up-to-date and proper communication as it is the most important tool for managing the project team.

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1   **R**esponsible **A**ccountable **C**onsulted **I**nformed

Communication is the most important tool in project management. According to the project managers, the role of human resources in project success has also increased. There are also some basic principles of human resources that every project manager should adhere to.

- Listen to project concerns!
- Treat stakeholders properly (eg based on their abilities).
- Keep trying to keep their enthusiasm!
- Listen to those who over-dimension problems and deal with them!
- Recognise the negative contributors!
- Identify the black sheep (s) of the project!
- Confirm that they have an important role in the project!
- Always ask for their opinion, but do not let them decide!
- Be one of the super users so they feel that they will be important after the project!
- Never escalate, always consult with him/her personally!
- We reward successes and partial successes and celebrate them!
- Don't break the enthusiasm of team members!
- Do not collectively punish. Let's be fair, objective!

As discussed earlier, project managers have general principles that they always adhere to or pass on to others. According to the project managers we interviewed, we have created a list that summarises the most important qualities. This list is by no means exhaustive and the Reader is left with the task of supplementing it.

What are the principles a project manager still needs to follow (enforce)? What they need to be good at?

- Focus on results and plans (task oriented)
- flexibility
- compromise
- being organised
- confidence building power
- proper communication
- openness and risk-taking
- honesty and trust
- political sensitivity
- Cultural sensitivity (people - centered)

The list was started by the task-centeredness and the human-centeredness that we already discovered in the Blake-Mouton grid (Varga, 2015). If we look at this list of 10 above, we can say that these capabilities may be needed for any project. In fact, it can be emphasised that each project manager should have a list of 10.

If you look at the list above, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the factors appearing in the project management conditions are people-related. If the project

manager is not really able to communicate properly or understand the language of the project team, then the team's work and efficiency will be significantly lower.

There will be resistance, conflict, debate, confrontation, there will be more and more who will drill the project, in other words, the most important step is the attitude of the project manager and how to start managing the project (Varga, 2015). Another very important Top 10 list has recently been published in a Project Management Association blog post. Here, too, Tom Mochal lists 10 factors that can be helpful in managing successful projects (Mochal, 2009) Not all of these „list 10" are related to the human factor, but there are several that are directly related to people's abilities and attitudes.

- Design on the basis of a project definition document - the emphasis is on planning.
- Plan in detail - and only within the appropriate timeframe.
- At the beginning of the work, document the project management procedures.
- Monitor schedule implementation and costs, and keep track of work plan!
- Pay attention to signs of possible problems!
- Make sure that the sponsor of the project has agreed to make changes to the scope.
- Prevent the volume from slipping (scope creep).
- Identify risks at the start of work.
- Continuously evaluate the risks that may arise during the project.
- Address any issues as soon as possible.

The project managers we interviewed also emphasised that planning is extremely important, but in many cases, a very detailed schedule is not needed at the beginning of the project. It is more important to carry out rational planning that is tailored to the project result and purpose, as often changes in the project environment fundamentally rewrite the terms and conditions. The project leaders also emphasised that the following factors should always be taken into account when managing a project team:

- Meetings should be held at a sufficient frequency and should not over-manage the project team
- Do not end a meeting without producing results (eg deadlines, naming those responsible)
- In addition to the results, the steps required to achieve them should be monitored
- The project is never completed when the tasks are completed, so follow-up, stabilisation and periodic recheck are necessary, as well as continuous improvement
- Insist on the continued involvement of people.
- And one of the most important principles in managing a project team: emotions should be influenced instead of intelligence in most cases.

The project leaders also agreed that a precise project definition phase is essential for project success. Eric Verzuh, a renowned project expert, has identified five key factors for project success (Verzuh, 2008). These can be summarised as follows:

1. agreement amongst the project stakeholders on the project objective and project outcome
2. a properly designed plan to measure progress
3. accurate and continuous communication
4. controlled scope
5. support for management

The above list is clearly related to realisable project success. If we do not pay sufficient attention to these factors, we are more likely to expect the project to fail. The project leaders also agreed on this list, and one of them also pointed out that the Bible for Projects is the Project Statement. It is important to mention that the project charter should not be created for our own purposes and it is important that all key players accept it. These key players include Project owner, External PM and key stakeholders. Keep everything up-to-date, which can be said for other project documents. The project leaders stressed the importance of communication besides the statutes a good project manager communicates, communicates and communicates. In addition, it should be emphasised that a good project manager is constantly able to delegate, measure and make suggestions. A good project manager assesses the potential outcome of each task and only convenes Board members for a decision when it is really needed. Weekly status meetings should always be held with core members and team members from the relevant project phase. In addition, a really good project manager is able to keep a to-do list of tasks and questions, so that nothing can distract members and the project manager. Let's have a To Do list and a Q&A list! With continuous communication and availability, it would be extremely important for us to be able to build as much as possible on controlling and reporting activities. In order to measure the progress of the project, we need to carry out project monitoring on an ongoing basis, where we develop a special information system for ourselves to identify plan - fact differences. Project leaders agreed that this activity is one of the most important tools for measuring progress. There was also a consensus that the development of this system should always be on the agenda and efforts should be made to produce simplified, but meaningful, reports for managers and project members. Controlling needs to be continuous, with budget attention to milestone payments, and not to be afraid of project re-planning. One project manager briefly pointed out that what we can do to become a better project manager is that interpersonal competencies are key and must be developed first. How to learn that?

a. the experience and tasks at work
b. from the people we come in contact with

c. from the difficulties that had to be overcome in previous assignments
d. formal training / learning (we can also train ourselves)

Finally, the project leaders agreed that one of the most obvious reasons for dealing with problems is to find the roots and try to combat them. It will be very important to use the tools of thoughtful attention during project management, and project managers must be closer to team members than ever before. A really good project manager is credible, trustworthy and able to energise your work environment. A good project manager will find common ground with stakeholders in other departments of the organization and be able to find consultative solutions to any problem. The project manager also manages his own time well. An effective coalition of project leader and project team results in project success. If these two actors can work together effectively in implementation, there is a much greater chance of success in project success. Otherwise, the best and most ingenious project plan will fail if we cannot win over the stakeholders to implement the plan. Project marketing is already working on how to find sponsors for your projects so that fewer potential stakeholders are obstructing your project.

Summary

This brief summary paper set out a simple objective. We had to determine that the best way to influence a project success is to be able to manage project team members properly. A project manager should ensure that the project stakeholders contribute as much as possible to the achievement of the project objective, in other words to facilitate the achievement of the project objective. Clearly, with the right project environment and well-managed teams, success is much easier to achieve. It is also clear to us that in such a short study it is impossible to list the criteria for good project management. This would require more extensive research and more substantial analysis, which in fact has not been undertaken by any international organization on a larger scale. Although there have been minor studies, a truly comprehensive analysis is still needed today. Nonetheless, we trust that the above advice can be useful, as it has been formulated by project managers who have been working for many years on project implementation and management. Special thanks go to Izabella Papp, IBM Project Manager, Mihály Panyi, MOL Project Manager and Virág Vasas, Project Specialist at KÉSZ Group. Alongside them, several smaller project specialists and higher education professionals in project management have expressed their views, which we have incorporated into this study. In conclusion, the human factor will continue to emerge, and the advancement of emotional project management will be visible in the next few years. We also need to state that the project's golden triangle will indeed need to be reinterpreted, and it is really worth considering whether an effective human factor can really be the fourth pillar of project success.

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Bio-notes

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