THE ART OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

"Project Management is the art and science of converting vision into reality." So read the definition given by A. Jain in September 1995 at the Global Project Management Forum in St. Petersburg. At Sipoc Solutions we believe that this definition captures the essence of Project Management.

General literature exposes us largely to the science of project management. Science is the mechanical part of project management -- the procedures and tools packaged as a methodology. Methodologies are an integral part of any project. They create a framework for activities to introduce uniformity and controllability.

The purpose of this paper is to move away from the science, to focus instead on the project manager as the core of the project and therefore the most crucial part of the project's success or failure.

Art is not mechanical. It is not procedures and tools that can be identified by logic. Art is more than all of this. It has its origin in the subconscious part of the human mind, tapping the most powerful potential available to all humans. It bypasses logic and centres itself in the emotions of a person, where feeling dictates whether something is right or wrong. Some may call this emotional response ‘intuition’, others refers to it as a ‘gut feeling’. Whatever we call it, it is there for our use. We must only develop it.

The question is how to develop it. The route that this paper takes is to explore intuition, starting with the project manager, moving to the other project participants and finally looking at the project itself.

1. THE PROJECT MANAGER AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Introduction

A project will always have the unknown, the surprises we can all do without that crop up according to Murphy’s Law when least needed. Such Murphy moments ask a lot of the project manager as a person. To keep ahead the project manager must constantly be in a process of self-development, learning all the time from every project's Murphy moments.

To take the road less travelled, the road that takes you past the camping places of the mediocrity, you need to develop a success habit. Biographies of great people show that they all have a success habit, something that they continuously do that makes the difference between them and other people. Peter Drucker regular chooses a topic to investigate and master. He has done this many times in his life, and it has given him such a broad basis of knowledge that he can talk about almost any topic. As a journalist on management, he is unrivalled.
The power of repetitive behaviour was proven by scientists to form order in what sometimes looks like total chaos. This fact was proven by studying complex systems. While the motivation fundis proclaim that goals are the wonder that gives people the world, abundant proof exists that setting goals is not always the pathway to success. What better example is there than New Year resolutions?

Goals are needed to give motivation and direction in our action, but they are not the power that solves today’s problems. The reason is: goals are for the future and not the present. What I do today solves today’s problems. Take the example of throwing a ball. The target is the reason why I throw and the target determines the directions of the action, but it is how I hold the ball, how fast I swing it and when I let it go that determines if I am going to hit the target or not.

Each person needs to focus on what they do today to achieve what they want tomorrow. The question is how?

1.2 The Process
The process of self-development must be based on a goal, otherwise there is no reason doing it. As the cat said to Alice in Wonderland: “If you do not know where you going, any road is the right choice.” What I do everyday will determine if I am going to reach my goal.

I will describe the process of self-development using three points that build on each other: knowledge, skills and behaviour or habit.

1.2.1 Knowledge
Knowledge is like gold, it must be mined. Like gold it must be worked into an article of value. We are the miners and the mine, our environment.

Our tools to open up the rich ridge are our observation of the world around us and the written word. Strictly one can argue that the written word is only someone else’s observation of the world and therefore not an extra point. The key is someone else’s view point. And it is a well-known fact that we all see the world through different eyes.

How do we create this article of value from the ore we have mined? Our brain absorbs all knowledge that our senses receive. Somewhere in our subconscious it gets stored. The amount of data stored in our brains is far more than the greatest data bank built by humans. The reason we don’t realise it is because our retrieval mechanisms are not very good.

This does not mean that this knowledge store is not available to us. Your mind sometimes makes use of it through a feeling – that uncomfortable feeling about something that you cannot explain by logic; that feeling that proved itself correct over time. Sometimes we listen to it, sometimes we ignore it. The more we ignore it, the less we experience it.

It is this feeling that forms the core of the art in project management. As project managers we must learn out of our experience and from books, feeding our subconscious mind with the information we want to have, and creating a frame of reference – even if we don’t know it consciously.

Then we need to pay attention to the uncomfortable feelings that arise in certain situations. If we don't, the feelings will disappear as we become less tuned into them. As project managers, we cannot afford to let this happen. This gut feeling is based on far more facts and knowledge than our conscious minds can ever evaluate. The art of project management, therefore, allows our subconscious mind to lead us in certain circumstances.
Everything our minds absorb is connected. No matter how irrelevant two different areas of knowledge are to each other, they are connected. Wisdom is when you can start seeing these links amongst the islands of knowledge. It is usually your subconscious mind that can reach this wisdom before the conscious mind even processes the knowledge on its own.

1.2.2. Skills
The next layer that builds on knowledge is skills. Skills come into play when we start adding value to the ore of knowledge mined out of our environment.

Skills are built from the underlying principle that governs a set of knowledge. A principle is measured in the amount of successful applications made of the knowledge in different circumstances. Therefore, by understanding the principle and applying it successfully, one learns a skill.

The question is, how do you identify the principle that governs a sea of knowledge, the underlying truth that connects pieces of knowledge that have no links on the surface? Once again it is your subconscious mind that finds these principles and reports them as feelings or intuition.

It is this feeling we create with the learned action. Take the example of playing rugby. You may know the rules of the game, and even have practised on the field, applying the rules successfully, but this is not enough to make you a good rugby player. You need to have that feeling of what to do with the ball in different situations during a game.

With constant evaluation you can only improve your skills. It is especially the negative feedback and the mistakes we make that are the most valuable, as they help us know what path not to take, urging us to correct ourselves. Much like a self-guidance missile, constant evaluation is always sending out a message and waiting for a response to let us know if we are on the right track. A negative response puts us back on course again.

1.2.3. Behaviour
If self-development forms the foundations and skills the walls, it is behaviour or habit that makes the roof. In the end it will be our behaviour or habits that will determine our success, so we need therefore to look carefully at this point.

As said in the introduction, repetitive behaviour ultimately creates order from the chaos in our lives. Behaviour is built on our knowledge and skills. By applying the correct knowledge and the right skills, the correct behaviour can be learned.

As already mentioned there is power in repetitive behaviour. Applying a constant rule for a certain circumstance in any given set of conditions will create a pattern of order. The question to be asked is this: What pattern do I want to produce in my live? If I know, the next question is: Are my habits taking me to that pattern?

We all have habits. Our lives are ruled by habits. Og Mandino said: “We are all the slaves of habit; why not be the slaves of good habit?” Behaviour is nothing else than a set of habits that we have learnt over time. A lot of these habits are so much part of ourselves that we do not even think of them as habits.

The art of project management is based on your habits or behaviour. The right habits or behaviour will take you above the level of mediocrity, and will add that extra touch to master the art that is needed for excellence.
2. THE PROJECT MANAGER AND RELATIONSHIPS

2.1 Introduction
Being in a process of self-development we only achieve private victories. These victories are there to pave the way to the public victories, the victories we share with the people around us.

My relationship with the people in and around my project can have a determined influence on the success or failure of my project. If I am a contractor, it can determine if I get my next contract or not.

Many great men in history attribute success to good relationships. Take a person like Dale Carnegie, for example. His primary skill was the ability to build good relationships with other people. In the end, the success of our project is measured by the satisfaction of the client, and good relationships can have a determining influence on the client's satisfaction.

2.2 The Process
Charoux identified three pillars to master the art of relationships in a work environment. These three pillars are: sensitivity, assertiveness and persuasiveness. Mastering these three areas develops your self-image and confidence.

2.2.1 Sensitivity
You are not alone on a project. The main function of a project manager is to facilitate people into actions that will accomplish a common goal. To work with people and get them to do whatever they must do, you need to connect with them and build a rapport. Covey called this an emotional bank account. You need to build goodwill into the core people on your project. Why? Because you as the project manager are not perfect, and you are going to slip when the pressures of the project increase. A project team characterised by goodwill will simply pick up the things you missed and stand in the gap for you.

Sensitivity is the oil or lubricant of all human relationships in any organisation. It is the key ingredient required for people to operate effectively in teams or when running meetings, and it is a crucial part of negotiations. It helps to develop that inter-cultural and inter-gender awareness and respect needed in today’s workplace.

Charoux defines sensitivity as follows: "The extent to which a person is able to read a situation accurately, both at the interpersonal and organisational level, and having read it, react to it in a tactful and diplomatic manner."

To read a situation is not an easy task, and neither is reacting “in a tactful and diplomatic manner”. Our degree of sensitivity lies in how we see people. Normally people tend to see others for what they signify to us. In our quest to develop sensitivity, we must overcome this natural tendency and see a person for what he or she is.

Unknowingly we communicate our feelings through our behaviour and words. Communicating the right message will create that invisible link that everybody knows exists, but nobody can explain it.

2.2.2 Assertiveness
A project manager can be excellent, but if he or she lacks assertiveness the task will never get done on time or done at all. Assertiveness is the extent to which a person is able to express his or her needs and opinions as well as exercise his or her legitimate authority in order to get the group or individual to accomplish the task.
As a project manager you must be able to exercise the authority vested in you by giving instructions and telling others what to do, without resorting to threats or punishment. In short, you must be able to lead your team assertively.

Assertive people are able to express their own views, opinions and values in a firm manner without becoming aggressive. They exercise the authority vested in them in order to get the group or individual to accomplish the task and always use the appropriate body language.

To be assertive is to take responsibility over yourself and be in control of yourself. This results in you being more relaxed and handling conflict and stress easier. You project yourself to the world as more self-confident, can negotiate better and say "no" to unreasonable requests. Others will be more likely to follow your lead and be motivated to action. Generally, by being more assertive you will gain more respect from the people you must work with on the project.

2.2.3 Persuasiveness
Being sensitive and assertive will take you far on your project, but you still need that something extra to top up your skills and present yourself as a true professional. This last skill is persuasiveness. This is the extent to which an individual is able to propose a course of action in such a convincing manner that the other party is influenced to act accordingly.

Persuasive people are able to point out advantages and benefits of adopting their point of view. They are able to argue their point further by pointing out the disadvantages of not adopting their point of view. The argument they use will be based on sound logic, facts and reasoning. For any weakness in their argument they will anticipate possible objections and build counter arguments. Their whole presentation and reasoning is built around the other person's needs and how to satisfy them. They can "think on their feet" and convey a sense of enthusiasm for their ideas through the use of the appropriate tone of voice – lively, convincing and enthusiastic.

Persuasiveness adds that something extra that you need to conclude certain issues, or just to pull your project through and finish it to your client’s satisfaction.

3. THE PROJECT MANAGER AND THE PROJECT

3.1 Introduction
Studies show that almost one-third of projects are cancelled before completion. At the time of cancellation, they average about 100% over schedule and over budget. Another one-third are completed, but at a cost of overrunning the schedule and budget by up to one-third. Most of the remaining one-third of projects exceed the original plan, though by lesser amounts. Only a few projects are completed in less than the originally planned schedule and cost.

Of course, there are numerous reasons for this dismal record, but one reason, surely, is the inability of the participants to feel risk. In the end this will determine the character of your project. Is it a process of constant crisis management or does it go according to plan?

The art of project management manifests itself the best in the ability of the project manager to stop crises before they really happen. Like the princess and the pea, the project manager has to be so finely tuned to be able to "feel" the Murphy moment before it happens.

Someone once wisely made the point that the project manager’s profile is a lot like that of an entrepreneur. Gerber made the following comment about the entrepreneur: "The entrepreneur is our creative personality – always at its best dealing with the unknown, prodding the future, creating probabilities out of possibilities, engineering chaos into harmony."
As project managers we need to develop this ability: the habit of prodding the future, and keeping an ear to the ground.

3.1.2 The process
Just as the project manager develops sensitivity with people, he or she needs to develop a sensitivity to the project, a sensitivity to feel the type and size of risk hidden in Pandora's box before it gets opened. Three types of risks can be sensed:

I. Feel the critical risks, before you even agree to undertake the project.

II. Feel the significant risks, before you commit to schedule and cost.

III. Feel the ongoing risks, throughout the project.

The "critical risks" are the risks that, if they materialise, are critical to carrying out the project successfully. In other words, if critical risks are not mitigated, your project joins the long list of failed ventures, you lose stature in your organisation, and your organisation loses money.

Risk is something that might or might not happen. The possibility of your home burning down is a risk. It might burn, or it might not. You can take various steps to minimise the possibility of fire, such as installing fireproof shingles and shielded electrical wiring. You can also support the local fire department; it often arrives in time to save most of the house.

If your house does burn down -- if the risk does occur -- the risk turns into a problem. Your task then becomes solving the problem. In this case, the solution is building a new house. That takes money. The money can come from fire insurance.

Similarly, a software risk is something that might or might not happen. At the very beginning of software development, when all that exists is a broad vision of what the resulting system might be, all that is feasible is to look for the critical risks. Even to do that much, however, you have to know where to look:

- You have to delimit the project. Some activities are within its limits, and some are outside. (You don't have to look there.)
- You have to capture the key requirements, or at least consider what they are likely to be.
- You have to sketch out the central features of an architecture that can accommodate these key requirements.

Then, within the scope of these key requirements and the corresponding architectural concept, you have to look for the lumps -- the critical risks. In general, these big risks fall into two categories: technical and business.

Technical risks are those at the edge of the state of the art for your organisation. First, of course, you have to identify them (feel them) and explore them far enough to understand what you are up against. Then you have a choice of several strategies:

- No bid. Recognise right up front that some jobs are not for you. Trying to sleep on that grapefruit will surely ruin your back!
- Push the critical risks outside the scope of the project; that is, define the project limits to exclude these risks (let someone else try to do the impossible).
- Consider the probability that a critical risk will actually materialise on this project. If the probability is zero, you can proceed happily.
• If the risk might materialise into an actual problem, can you visualise an approach for coping with it?

• Is there a consultant or subcontractor capable of coping with a risk beyond the capacity of your own organisation?

Business risks are the non-technical happenings that might derail your project – loss of a key person, lack of staff on schedule, and so on. Perhaps the most important business risk at this initial phase is the client’s organisation. Can the key players in your organisation work successfully with their counterparts in the client organisation? Working through the critical risks provides an opportunity to gauge this risk.

4. CONCLUSION

The art of project management is more than just methodology. It is a feeling about how to manage the project. In the end it comes down to the ability to "feel" the risk in the project; to "sense" the Murphy moments before they occur.

To reach this point the project manager needs to choose the road less travelled, the one that leads past the camps of mediocrity to the heights of the mountain. The project manager needs to be constantly involved in a process of self-development, teaching him or herself the necessary success habits.

Gaining the private victory of mastering success habits, the project manager is not isolated. To work with the stakeholders in the project is crucial to the project's success. With the required sensitivity, assertiveness and persuasiveness the right atmosphere can be created for successful projects.

It is time to develop that "gut" feeling and sometimes just act on it, even if it defies all logic.

Further Reading
1. Introducing Fractal Geometry -- Lesmoir-Gordon, Nigel; Rood, Will; Edney, Ralph.
3. Seven habits of highly effective people -- Covey, Stephen.
4. The greatest salesman in the world -- Mandino, Og.
5. Developing relationships at work -- Charoux, Eric.
6. When I say no, I feel guilty -- Smith, Manual J.
7. The E-Myth -- Gerber, Michael E.
8. Feel the grapefruit - recognizing critical risk -- Punam, L.H; Myers, W. (e-mail article)

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Daniël and Gerhard run Sipoc Solutions, a company that offers a full range of project management services.