

Getting Executives To Act For Project Success

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Abstract

A fundamental truth is that project success depends not only on the actions of the project manager but also on the executive. The trap of applying best practice project management only to have the project fail because of executive inaction or counteraction can be avoided. Project managers can use sources of power to influence these executive actions and increase the odds of success.

This paper explores why the evolving and expanding definition of project success has led to an environment in which the project manager is ever more dependent on the executive. It builds upon current thinking about creating environments for project success, and it explains how some of the current techniques in project management can be applied to get executives to take the desired actions. A central theme is that project managers are empowered to extend their sphere of influence beyond the immediate project boundaries up into the organization. A set of actions is identified that the executive can take to help projects succeed, and results from recent PMI® sponsored research are included about how project managers can sell these actions to their executives.

The impact of organizational maturity and organizational behavior on project success is identified and is related to the ingredients necessary for organizational change. A Project Management Council is described as a key approach for implementing this type of organizational change and to tailoring the scope of change to the environment.

Introduction

The Problem

Project managers are falling into the trap of applying best practice project management **only to have the project fail because of executive inaction or counteraction**. Project managers who continue doing what used to work by focusing within the bounds of the project are now finding success more difficult to achieve. The problem is that project success is dependent to an increased degree not only on the efforts of the project manager, but also on the efforts of the executive as well. The problem is getting the executive to act for project success.

The Context

This is a good news story. **Much is known** about the important role executives' play in project success; authors and practitioners have been seriously engaged with this subject in the last decade. Publications dealing with excellence in project management, the project environment, and the selling of project management to senior executives have informed us. Members of project management offices have been performing functions and duties that have dealt with areas beyond the traditional project bounds to include items in the domain of the executive. This paper draws from numerous references and blends the wisdom from these sources with my experiences and opinions. As a senior project manager, I have led a program to mature the project management practices across a large organization; from this perspective I have been leading the development and operations of an internal project manager certification program that involves over a thousand project managers per year. In this capacity I frequently encounter project management students who are returning to their workplace after learning an approach or technique in a training class that they are having difficulty applying because of something their executive is doing or not doing. My observations of and interactions with these project managers and their executives serve as a basis for some of the views expressed in this paper.

Executive Definition

An executive is defined as a person responsible for the administration of a business or department. This executive may be an individual, or it may be a function performed by more than one individual. On an organization chart the executive appears above other individuals and functions, including the project manager. An executive who is focused on the business operations and processes associated with the department in which the project resides would be a likely candidate to act for project success. Ideally, this executive is positioned close enough to the project work to be able to have a genuine impact.

What Has Changed?

Success Definition Expanded

The big change over time has been to the definition of project success; it has been greatly expanded (Kerzner 2000, Archibald 2003). In the 1960s, the early days of project management, success was measured entirely in technical terms. Either the deliverable product worked or it didn't. During the 1970s that narrow definition was expanded to encompass completion on time, within budget, and at an acceptable level of quality. This has become known as the triple constraint and has been widely used as the basis for much of the project management industry. During the 1980s further expansion took place to include criteria of being accepted by the customer. And during the 1990s still more criteria were added, having to do with not disturbing the main work flow of the organization and without changing the corporate culture. This expansion has been difficult for some to deal with, while others have folded a success definition step into their life cycle process (O'Brochta 2002).

One highly public example of this **expansion of the definition of project success** has been the space program. In the early days scientists and engineers were trying to develop the basic capability to launch a manned rocket, a narrow technical success criterion. That accomplishment was followed by the historical challenge and expansion of the project success criteria by President John F. Kennedy to "land a man on the Moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the decade." By the time the Space Shuttle Program was underway, the success definition further expanded to include the customer, specifically to produce commercially profitable material in space. Recently President George W. Bush took the success definition for the space program into the cultural realm when he articulated the goal to "extend human presence across our solar system...because doing so improves our lives, and lifts our national spirit."

Project Manager Dependent

Lifting our national spirit: now there is a broad definition of project success. How can a project manager deal with the fact that the definition of project success has expanded so greatly? How can a project manager succeed when project goals include organizational and cultural impact? How can a project manager perform successfully when such a substantial portion of the definition of project success extends beyond the traditional project boundaries? The simple answer is that as project managers we cannot keep doing what we have been doing and expect to succeed. The answer is that our traditional control based approach toward the management of projects is becoming less effective; in that approach we sought to employ the planning as well as the monitoring and controlling process groups in the PMBOK® (PMI 2004). What we could not control we learned to influence, and what we could not influence we learned to be aware of so that we could be ready with corrective actions. The answer is that as project managers we must now turn to an increasing degree to the executive. We have, for better or worse, become highly dependent on the executive. Project success now depends on our ability to **form a beneficial partnership with the executive**. Project success now depends on getting executives to act.

What Executive Actions?

Read References

One of the highlights of the situation surrounding this topic of getting executives to act for project success is the existence of so **many high quality and pertinent sources of reference information**. I have read and re-read these references, used them extensively in my own pursuits in project management, and internalized them to such a degree that I have difficulty separating the ideas they contain from my own. An action that I wholeheartedly endorse for any project manager contemplating getting executives to act for project success is to scan the reference list at the end of this paper and read as many of these useful works as possible.

Early publications address creating the project environment (Graham 1997), excellence in project management (Kerzner 1998), implementing project management in any organization (Heerkens 2000), creating a project management center of excellence (Schneidmuller 2000), moving beyond the wall of resistance (Maurer 1996), and the best practices of project management groups in large functional organizations (PMI 1997). Servant leadership, a concept targeted at turning the organizational hierarchy upside down, is highly applicable to the project environment (Greenleaf 2002), and no-nonsense advice regarding project manager behavior addresses the remarkable payoff for demonstration of passion and boldness (Whitten 2005). Publications about project success stories (Laufer 2000) and new product development (Cooper 2001) help tease out some of the success aspects unique to development projects. Change as it appears from the individual's perspective is addressed using the image of cheese being moved beyond the reach of a mouse (Johnson 1998), and rule breaking is presented as the conclusion of an extensive Gallup Organization analysis as a platform for change (Buckingham 1999). Power and politics are addressed as they pertain to project management (Pinto 1988, Verma 1995).

As a result of PMI® sponsored research, information has been published about the important topics of justifying the value of project management (Pennypacker 2002), quantifying its value (Ibbs 2002), and selling its value to senior executives (Thomas 2002). Project management maturity provides a framework for discussions about organizational performance (Ibbs 1997, Kerzner 2001, Crawford 2002). Senior executive commitment (Sheard 2001), their project IQ (Nielsen 2004), and their duties (Whitten 2002) have been documented. Creating Project Management Office functions and organizations to support the needs of project managers and executives have been well addressed (Crawford 2002, Rad 2002, Englund 2003, Bolles 2002, Dai 2002, Bridges 2000).

Executive Actions

By all means, read extensively, get lots of experience, and **make a list** for yourself of the actions that you would like your executive to take that will help your project succeed. Alternately, to help get started, consider my list; it has been assembled and distilled during the past few years as I have increased the amount of consulting that I have done with executives who have wanted to help project managers (Exhibit 1). I have asked for and received many similar lists from executives that I have coached during workshops on this very subject. Those interactions, combined with my experiences managing and helping project managers, have led me to revise and refine this list. As much as possible I have trimmed the list to a minimum number of actions, I've focused on actions that are practical and achievable in most organizational cultures, and I have eliminated actions better suited to project managers and others. If this list were a tool, I would consider it be the "Swiss Army Knife" of executive actions for project success, focused on the essentials with a minimum of extraneous information. As with all tools I must point out, perhaps even caution, that this list does not work for all executives or all project managers in all situations. Skill and experience are required to use any tool as well as this list. Deciding what to include on this list and acting on it require considerable sensitivity to those involved and to the situation.

At the top of the list of executive actions are organizing the work into projects and then picking the right projects. Project managers can feel like fish out of water when they work in an environment that does not **organize and manage work as projects**. Much effort can be spent trying to convince and educate the myriad stakeholders about the merits of project basics, such as requirements definition, baselines, schedules, and configuration control. This unproductive and often frustrating time could be better spent if the department or section of the organization organized itself to be project based, if it were separated from the ongoing and repetitive operations. Project managers can easily drown when they have too many projects to work on. **Picking the right projects** can be as

sophisticated as strategic portfolio management or as simple as doing only those projects for which the project managers and project teams have the capacity to do. I favor the simple approach: do only as many projects as can be done well; don't agonize over the decisions about which projects to do. Actual research into the optimum number of projects for a project manager to manage successfully is sparse; however the few works that I have come across do coincide with empirical evidence. Fewer projects are better; fewer projects mean more time spent per project. Fewer projects mean that ultimately more projects conclude successfully. The optimum number of projects per project manager seems to range between three and eight; more results in a quantum decline in the project success rate.

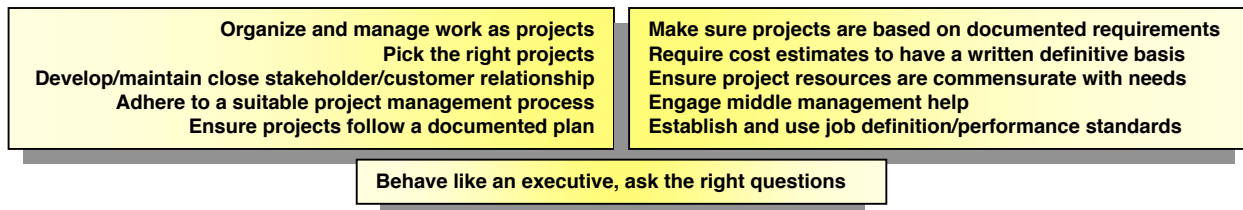


Exhibit 1 - Executive Actions

Executives have a unique responsibility to **develop and maintain close stakeholder and customer relationships** that complement and enhance the relationships formed by the project manager. The time invariably comes when an issue, concern, or decision needs to be addressed by someone other than the project manager. Project funding, priority, and requirements are often topics that benefit from this type of supportive intervention. Note that these executive relationships should be conducted so that the project manager's authority and responsibility are maintained and so that the project manager is kept in the loop and well informed. Ideally, it is the project manager who is serving up the topics for the executive to act on.

Project management is a discipline and as such benefits by **adhering to a suitable project management process**. Project managers who are at the top of their game have come to rely on executives to establish a standardized process for their organization to use. They seek to be held accountable for applying tailored versions of this process to each of their projects and they rely on others to do the same. They can, in the absence of executive action, develop and follow their own processes, but they recognize the limits in efficiency and effectiveness of doing so.

Project managers expect executives to ensure that they **follow a documented project plan and ensure that projects are based on documented requirements**. They expect to be given adequate time up front during the initial project phase to build these baseline documents and to be isolated from pressure to hastily proceed without them; they also expect to be held accountable for continuous controlled revisions to these documents through the project life cycle. To help with the understanding of these baseline documents executives should **require cost estimates to have a written definitive basis**. In return for managing their projects according to plan, project managers look to their executives to **ensure that project resources (time, people, and money) are commensurate with needs**. If shortages and/or changes occur, the executive should expect to receive an impact assessment from the project manager that has been developed in an environment without excessive pressure to absorb the change or simplistically do more with less. This impact assessment, which could serve as the basis for plan revisions, will be formulated with respect to the plans, requirements, and other documents that have been baselined.

Actions by the executive need to be taken to **engage middle management help** and to **establish and use job definitions and performance standards**. By holding middle managers responsible for supporting project managers and by insuring that career progression and growth is aligned with best practice project management the executive will create a long lasting and sustainable project based culture. They can demonstrate their commitment to this culture by **behaving like an executive and asking the right questions** of their project managers. They can acknowledge that their role as an executive is enhanced when they behave like a servant leader in a role supportive of the project manager. In this culture they will attract, retain and grow project management excellence.

Executive Questions

Here is a list that is an absolute favorite of the executives with whom I consult (Exhibit 2). One executive who I have known for years and have worked with recently has actually had this list reduced in size and laminated; he wears it around his neck attached behind his employee badge, and he glances casually at it when he finds himself in a meeting with a project manager. This list helps him to behave like an executive and ask the right questions. It helps minimize traditional distractions to get into the project details, to solve the project issues, or to do the project manager's job for them. The list is my own; like the list of executive actions it has evolved over time. At this point it has become stable; I do occasionally add or subtract from it. It is also a tool that should be used with caution. It is offered as a starting point for executives who are looking to **quickly and effectively begin behaving** in a way that demonstrates their support for project managers. At the top of the list is the extraordinarily effective question for the executive to ask, "What can I do to help?"

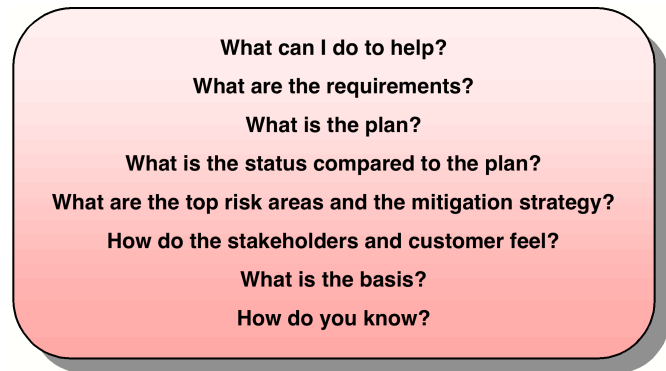


Exhibit 2 - Executive Questions

How Can PM Get Executive To Act?

Just Do It

A well-known international sports shoe manufacturer has built a marketing campaign around the expression "Just Do It." That phrase can also serve as the foundation for understanding how the project manager can get the executive to act for project success. As a rule, project managers have **far more ability and authority than they use**. In fact, executives frequently appreciate and indeed expect project managers to demonstrate initiative in helping them understand and act for project success. Many executives are action oriented – they just need to know what action to take, why they should take it, when they should act, and how they should do it. The project manager is uniquely positioned to get the executive to act for project success; indeed, project managers can excel at getting their executive to act for project success (Whitten 2005). Once a project manager understands how best to do it, they should just do it.

Understand Differing Viewpoints

How we view project management is linked to the position we hold in the organizational hierarchy. It has been long understood that the view from the top is quite different from the view from the lower levels (Archibald 2003). Project managers tend to view project management quite personally, often with little or no distinction between their performance and the performance of the project. Success for them can be measured by career advancement. On the other hand, functional or mid-level managers tend to see project management process in a fairly negative light. Often it can be viewed as a dangerous threat to their established authority and organizational domain, as evidence of implied deficiencies or failures in the traditional functional organization, with reflections on the functional managers personally. For them, increased reliance on project management process equates to decreased reliance on their authority. They would have difficulty declaring success if it meant that they could not retain full power and control. Executives, however, tend to see project management in **various and sometimes conflicting but usually positive ways**. They see it as a means to an end, as a good way of motivating people toward achievement of specific objectives, and as a source of future executives. Success for them is often associated with meeting the delivery schedule.

Understand Executive's Project Management Ability

Some executives undertake their jobs with the benefit of some background in project management while others do not. We can envision a continuum across which an executive's project management ability can be plotted; it is imperative that we take this into consideration as we offer them actions and as we help them carry out these actions. For those executives higher up on this continuum, who have understanding of and experience with project basics, such as requirements definition, baselines, schedules, and configuration control, we can work with them to tailor their experiences to our current needs. Such an executive may already understand the benefits of having projects adhere to a suitable project management process; we can work to include the elements from their process experience that are germane and let pass the elements that aren't. If, on the other hand, we find the executive at the low end of this continuum we would be better off using a different approach to engage them in the project process action; we could offer them a project process with which we were familiar. These alternate approaches to dealing with similar actions by executives with different project management ability can and should be extended to other executive actions for project success.

Communicate Using Business Context

How a project manager communicates has at least as much effect on the executive as what he communicates. Much has been done to elevate the level of understanding of how to "sell" project management to senior executives (Thomas 2002). This excellent body of work instructs project managers to emphasize alignment of project management and project goals with corporate goals and value statements. It identifies the value of using business language and **putting the project in context** of business value where project aspects that relate to financial, growth, customer satisfaction, competition, and sales are emphasized. Data is available for the project manager to use to support making the business case. Thanks to research (Pennypacker 2002, Ibbs 2002) we can use some facts and figures to address how much better business performance is at companies with more mature project management practices (25% sales growth, 88% return on investment, 61% productivity increase), how much better project performance is at companies with more mature project management practices (schedule performance index is about twice as good), and how much more predictable project performance is (standard deviation for schedule performance index drops from 20% to as low as 5%). A key that appears throughout the topic of communicating with executives about project management is the need to identify what triggers the executive's interest, to develop a set of responses tailored to each trigger, and to back up each response with evidence that is relevant to each individual executive. If the executive's hot button is growth, then framing the project management related action for the executive in terms of growth would be the most effective communication approach.

Understand The Organizational Maturity Barrier

Now for a dose of reality: what the executive can do is limited. Organizational behavior and social science come into play. Where we work has a lot to do with **how much latitude** the executive and the project manager have. We can turn to the body of work that addresses project management maturity for an understanding of the limits in what actions an organization can succeed at taking (Ibbs 1997, Kerzner 2001, Crawford 2002). This work teaches us that the lower maturity organizations are characterized by ad-hoc activity with little or no formal project procedures; individual heroics that occasionally result in success are rewarded. In contrast, formal well-defined and repeatable processes that are undergoing continuous improvement characterize high maturity organizations; success is intentional and can more easily be replicated. If we are in the typical lower level maturity organization it would not only be inappropriate but counterproductive if we attempted to get our executive to install an enterprise-wide project management information system just so we could have easy access to financial data for our single project. Instead, we would respond to our executive when they ask "what can I do to help?" by saying that we would like them to task the Finance Department to extract from the data they already have and deliver it consistent with a project template form that we specify. The executive actions must conform to the maturity of the organization.

Understand The Change Readiness Barrier

Now for another dose of reality: organizations can only change when the timing is right and even then the pace of change is limited. Organizations and individuals are at **varying levels of change readiness**. It does little

good to push for a change if the individuals and/or the organization is not ready; in fact, it is counterproductive and “sours the well water” for future attempts at similar changes. High readiness levels are characterized by strong desires for change and readiness for it; a strong resistance to change characterizes low readiness levels. Moderate readiness levels are characterized by a desire for change but a lack of readiness. If there was a merger yesterday, and today there was a reorganization, then tomorrow would not be a good time to ask an executive to implement a substantial change to the standard corporate product development lifecycle. A more appropriate executive action would be to grant approval for your single project to tailor the standard lifecycle in a way that benefits the project but does not broadly impact other projects and processes in the organization. The executive actions must conform to the change readiness level of the organization.

Understand And Use Power

Project managers have at their disposal an extremely effective tool for overcoming barriers and getting their executive to act for project success. Through the understanding and use of power the project manager can accomplish a tremendous amount. Power refers to the ability of the project manager to influence others to act for the benefit of their project; it is a resource that enables compliance or commitment from others. We again benefit from the work of others (Maurer 1996, Pinto 1988, Verma 1995); all provide insight into the sources and effective use of power. We can recognize that as project managers we do have opportunities to **develop and use sources of power that others don't**. Specifically, we are the experts; no one knows more about our project than we do. This knowledge can serve as the basis for opinions, decisions, and actions that are rational and well supported. This source of power can distinguish the actions we want the executive to take from the blur of other activity that fills their job. A second source of power at the project manager's disposal is their perceived association with others who are influential. Successful project managers develop and cultivate relationships with a vast array of stakeholders that extend far beyond the immediate bounds of their project. The fact that so many projects are managed in matrix organizations further enhances this effect. These connections are perceived by others as a significant source of power, one that can and should be used by the project manager to get executives to act for project success.

The Silver Bullet

And now for the “silver bullet” approach that can work in virtually all situations, with differing viewpoints, with differing levels of project management ability, with various business contexts, across organizational maturity barriers, and across change readiness levels. The approach is to **form a Project Management Council**. It can be the key to identifying the actions for the executive to take for project success. It can amplify the power of the project manager to get executives to act for project success. It is my favorite approach (Exhibit 3). I have used it often and so have many others (Crawford 2002, Rad 2002, Englund 2003, Bolles 2002, Dai 2002, Bridges 2000). Referred to variously as a project support office, project management working group, project management office, strategic project office, project management center of excellence, and project management community of practice these are organizations formed explicitly for the purpose of focusing on how project management is/can/should be practiced within the organization. My ideal project management council is comprised entirely of motivated project

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management practitioners who have volunteered for the assignment. They are experienced, visionary, change agents. As thought leaders they know how project management is done and how it should be done. They care deeply about their chosen profession and are concerned with the wellbeing of other project managers.

Exhibit 3 - Punch Line

A project management council can and should serve as a link between project managers and executives. Sizing it to no more than about a dozen people, having it chaired and/or sanctioned by an executive, and limiting its authority will help it gain recognition for the good it can do and help it counter many of the stereotypical negatives associated with groups of this type that exist outside the formal organization chart. Having it focus broadly on the entire organizational system as it relates to projects and project management raises its bona fides. Having it make recommendations to executives and provide help with implementing the executive actions positions it to have enduring value. Precluding it from control over decisions and resources minimizes the possibility that it will be viewed as a threat to established organizational decision making mechanisms. Limiting the term of its members to a year or possibly two will insure a constant flow of fresh perspectives and ideas. Chartering the project management

council to identify the barriers to project success and to make recommendations to overcome these barriers and then giving it the latitude to explore the paths that follow will invigorate its members as well as the organization.

Now Go Do It

Progress Is Incremental And Cumulative

Victory, when it comes to getting executives to act for project success, is incremental and cumulative. It does not come all at once, and it does not occur in all elements or all executives of the organization at the same pace. Since by definition we are dealing with behavior and change, we must recognize that we are dealing with what is usually a slow evolution rather than a sudden revolution. Executives and organizations have spent years becoming who they are. The good news is that the cumulative effects of modestly-paced, genuine change in an executive and in an organization is enduring. The project manager who understands the changing definition of project success and who understands the critical dependent relationship necessary with the executive has joined the evolution. The project manager that tailors the actions for their executive to take based on differing viewpoints, the business context, and the organizational maturity has moved the evolution forward. The project manager who develops and uses sources of power and who takes the bold step of forming a project management council has accomplished a successful evolution not only for themselves but also for the organization and executives as well.

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