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How to create project management heaven in your daily life?

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Program Manager – Enterprise Resource Planning

Abstract

This paper provides a few new distinctions needed for success in today's world of global competition, dwindling budgets, sagging economies, and the need to produce more with less. While practice standards and conventional management wisdom are still valid, today's project and program managers (PMs) will get an edge if the key distinctions discussed in this paper are used. The Highway to Project Management Heaven goes through five challenging places: people, passion, purpose, process, and paradigms. PMs are encouraged to skillfully blend what they were taught and have traditionally known, with the paradigm shifts and trends that are emerging. For each key distinction, this paper provides a list of failure factors to watch out for and success factors to aim for. Based on past successes, the author provides real-life examples and encourages today's PMs to utilize the key distinctions discussed to create the Project Management Heaven in their daily work lives.

Before we begin the Journey

“Not enough resources.”

“Our budgets are cut by 12% this year.”

“There is not enough executive support.”

“My boss still wants me to get this out in less than 3 months.”

“Man, we have so many project issues, it's driving me crazy!”

“Several team members are not fully committed; they act as if they're doing all this for me!”

Does any of this sound familiar to you?

All of us have been there. Some of us are there right now. It is called: project hell. As project or program managers (PMs), we are aware of these types of negative conditions that often plague the project work environments. If some or all of these conditions exist, we definitely are in project hell!

Global competition, shrinking budgets, tougher economies, and the ever-increasing need to be faster, better, and more efficient - all these conditions are only going to make our lives tougher as PMs. In addition to the conventional project management tools and wisdom, we need to get a few more key distinctions that will help us excel in our roles.

Three Most Important Things in Project and Program Management

We heard that famous saying about the three most important things in real estate: location, location, and location!

From experience, the three most important things in project and program management are: preparation, preparation, and preparation!

Preparation is a key prerequisite for success in any endeavor, especially in management. Before we hit the highway to the Project Management Heaven, let us see what we need to get ready for the journey:

Do the Home Work—Know where the project is, who the key stakeholders are, what their hot buttons are, why the project or program exists in the first place, and what the key project issues are. Knowing answers to these questions will help us a great deal before we begin.

Develop an Initial Approach—Before we can reach anywhere, we need to know where we are headed. We need to have a destination in mind and a road map to get there. When we start out, we may not always have a completely clear path and all the answers we need on how to get to the destination. However, as PMs, developing an initial approach is essential. We will be open to adjustments needed during the journey, but it certainly helps to have a starting approach in mind. Nobody is going to follow a leader who doesn't have a clue on how to get started. Identifying the key stakeholders, quickly polling them, as well as tapping into our past experiences will greatly help us in this regard.

Assemble the Tool Box—Making sure we assemble a set of tools of the trade we need for the journey is also important. We also realize that we may have to modify the tools we started out with, and also add any new tools during the journey. We have A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) (Project Management Institute, 2008) and industry standards and best practices to pick our tools from.

If we ask coaches or players who won a major championship in any professional sport, most of them talk about the importance of the preparation that their teams went through as part of their game plans and practice sessions before the games even started. Good preparation is one of the key prerequisites for success—not just in sports, but also in project and program management.

Heavenly Highway

We are now prepared to start the journey!

And, we just realized that the Heavenly Highway goes through these five challenging places: (1) people; (2) passion; (3) process; (4) purpose; and (5) paradigms (the Five P's). We will make a stop at each of these five places—to

pause, ponder, refresh, and re-fuel ourselves—each time.. .before we get back on the highway!

As PMs, we are taught a set of concepts, tools, and techniques. And there are many books and articles on all aspects of project and program management. In addition, using what is relevant from these and paying close attention to the Five P's has led to successful projects.

1. People

Abraham Lincoln said, "Democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.." Likewise, projects should be the endeavors of the people, by the people, and for the people!

People are a project or program manager's most precious resource. Recruiting the right people, developing, guiding, encouraging, and effectively engaging them are critical for the success of any project or program. In addition, it is important to listen and pay close attention to their ideas, needs, and concerns.

Other than funds, any PM's greatest resource is the project team. We cannot accomplish anything by ourselves! We need to have the "right" people, at the "right" time, with the "right" mind-set in order to accomplish the things we are asked to. It's important to realize that we will not always have the luxury of having all the rights synchronously present. Successful PMs know how to manage in spite of this drawback by paying the right amount of attention to the people aspect of the project or program, right from the beginning. We will need to work hard to assemble the right teams, and do all the right things to keep everything right! This is easier said than done!

PMs are so wrapped up in the goals, deadlines, milestones, deliverables, budgets, and costs, that they sometimes have a tendency not to pay enough attention to this key area. Not intentionally, but sometimes they tend to forget how important the

people aspects are to the success of the project or program. These are important aspects of this key area: Having true empathy for the needs of our teams; listening to their concerns; cheering them for their successes along the way; giving them constructive feedback the right way at the right time; challenging them to grow; coaxing them to learn; being there for them when they need us; and showing them in words and actions that we really care.

It is essential that we take the time needed to get to know our people and strive to bring out the best in them. Each individual on the team is important and has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Successful PMs strive to find a way to harness the strengths of their team members, while finding solutions to fill the gaps created by their weaknesses. People, working for those kinds of PMs, usually tend to give their best.

2. Passion

Nothing has ever been accomplished without “passion!” Think about what these five people have in common: Mother Teresa, Donald Trump, Jerry Rice, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi.

They all had passion! They not only had a real passion for their goals, but also a talent to connect with their people and communicate it. They were extremely clear as to what their goals were and were extremely passionate about reaching those goals. Through words and actions, they were also able to successfully communicate that passion!

As an example, Mahatma Gandhi was one man pitted against a mighty empire that had worldwide dominance at the time. How did he manage to gain independence for India? A frail man with no money, no weapons, no people, not even a position of any kind! He was actually a “nobody.” How was he able to get independence for his country from hundreds of years of British rule?

He used his intrinsic passion, assembled enough people around him, and ignited passion in them to get the job done!

Not just Gandhi, if we look at the great people who were successful in the history of humanity, we find that the majority of them were very passionate about their goals. If we possess and display a fraction of that passion, we will truly be amazing as PMs!

No need to be a phony; if we truly develop an intrinsic passion for what we do, it will definitely come through in our team meetings and how we go about doing things in our daily work life. These will help spread the passion: Getting excited about the projects or programs we lead; the organizations we work for; and the value we bring to our stakeholders and ultimately to the society. Intrinsic passion carried in the inner core of a leader is like a light! It ignites passion in others and inspires them to perform miracles!

In these tougher times of resource scarcity, getting the most from each team member is absolutely essential. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through inspiration and motivation. Therefore, the amount of passion we possess as PMs and the ability we develop to communicate it effectively to our teams becomes important.

These ideals will help in our journey: Igniting that inner light of passion first in ourselves; doing what we can to appeal to our teams' inner core; helping to ignite that passion in them; and directing it all towards the project or program.

Inspired and passionate people are motivated, fun to work with, perform better, and accomplish amazing things on their projects or programs.

3. Purpose

People and passion are necessary, but certainly not enough to accomplish great things! We also need them to focus toward one common goal! We need to involve everyone and channel their passionate energies, in a meaningful fashion, toward

accomplishing a common goal and purpose. All those great people we just talked about were able to paint a perfectly clear picture of their goals and purpose—as they rallied their people to create the results they wanted.

In the program or project context, we have management plans and schedules that are typically used to communicate our goals in a formal fashion. We also keep reminding our people where we are headed through multiple communication channels. These will help us on our journey: Clarity in project goals, milestones, target dates, roles, and responsibilities. We know.. .nothing frustrates project teams more than following a leader who is not decisive and not clear on goals.

One key distinction we can make here is that... a purpose is different from a set of goals. While goals are the deliverables we are trying to accomplish, a purpose is the real reason behind the goals. For example, if completing a conservation project in Africa on-time and under-budget is a project goal, saving thousands of animals from extinction is the real purpose.

In my observation, PMs generally do a great job of laying out the project goals to their teams, but often do a poor job of communicating the real purpose behind the goals. While laying out the project goals clearly for the team is important and necessary, communicating the purpose behind the project occasionally will help us reach that inner core. As human beings, all of us naturally want to do things that are worthwhile and have a lasting impact; it makes us feel good inside. Saving thousands of animals is far more appealing and inspirational than just putting some brick and mortar together in a remote jungle somewhere in Africa. It makes us go that extra mile!

Great leaders in history were often able to do this; they touched people's hearts successfully, and inspired them to accomplish a greater purpose!

How was Martin Luther King, Jr., in his short life of less than 40 years, able to make such a huge impact on a nation and the world? While struggling to achieve non-segregation through his non-violent civil disobedience approach, King touched people's inner core through his "I Have a Dream" speech that changed a nation and the world forever.

King's goals were to achieve a society with non-segregation and civil rights for all African Americans. However, the purpose behind the goals was much larger: to elevate human dignity to newer heights! The purpose he had and was able to articulate, was much bigger than the goals themselves.

As PMs, we will be able to motivate our teams better if we strive to help them understand the real reasons why we are asking them to perform activities and accomplish goals in our work environments.

4. Process

We now have the right people on the project. We were able to ignite their passion, and articulate not just the goals, but also the purpose. We are more than half-way to the Promised Land. The project team is now ready, pumped up, and focused!

To ensure project or program success, we also need to have our teams marching to the same band! We need to ensure that our teams are following a common process and project methodology, and they are not going in different directions. Just imagine what will happen if all the highly energetic and passionate individuals on the team start doing their own things? Imagine the chaos it creates!

In conjunction with our key team members, we will need to develop, communicate, get the buy-in from the entire team, and make sure everyone follows the adopted process and project methodology. As we know, good program and project management plans help us document and communicate the process, methodology, tools, and techniques we will use to keep everyone on the same page.

As PMs, we were taught to use the structured and agreed upon processes to the extent possible. Therefore, we tend to get caught up in what we need to do, and often forget the fact that the process is just a means to achieve an end, not an end in itself! A process exists to accomplish a goal; it is not a goal. Hence, it is necessary to stay flexible enough to consider changing the process itself, if needed.

One distinction we can make here is that while it is important to set a process or project methodology to be used, it is also important to develop our acute sensory mechanisms to observe what is working or not working; and be able to make necessary changes on our journey.

The PMBOK®Guide's emphasis on monitoring and controlling key project parameters on a continuous basis for making the changes needed to keep moving in the direction of our goals supports this key distinction.

Right people, passion, common purpose, and a process methodology—we are now definitely on the right track! However, to pick up momentum and arrive at our destination, we need that last “P”—Paradigms.

5. Paradigms

There was a time when everybody believed the world was flat. Does anyone operate from that belief anymore?

Paradigms are those common beliefs that affect our thinking, words, and actions in everyday life. Some paradigms shift, and some new paradigms appear in our work environments. These create paradigm shifts that affect us: New global realities, industry trends, technological innovations, customer demands, economic conditions, and new methodologies. To be successful in what we do, we must strive to identify and incorporate them in our daily work lives as appropriate.

Let us look at an example. As a project methodology, there was a time when software development life cycle (SDLC) was king! It became immensely popular in the information technology (IT) industry, since it made sense to have a structured waterfall approach to project management. Teams went through multiple stages of a project, typically consisting of concept, planning, requirements, design, build, test, and implementation. Several modified versions of the SDLC methodology were developed, and different organizations had slightly differing names, but for the most part, key concepts remained more or less the same for decades. Everyone was happy because there was a “structure” that made sense to follow. Some industries outside of the IT also adopted parts of this concept with success.

In following the SDLC methodology to maximize the probability of on-time and under-budget project completion, teams were reluctant to accept changes to the project parameters, such as scope and requirement changes—even if they were coming from their customers! If customer requirements change, the methodology dictated the teams to go through a much-dreaded change control process!

As a result, projects were trying to deliver products as per the original specifications, but the problem was that the customer requirements would have already changed! The process was too structured to adapt to the changing conditions, including those changes the customers wanted. The result was that when the products were delivered, they were not what the customers really wanted! Too many analysts, managers, and senior managers (“middlemen”) were following the process, but were coming in the way of creating true value as needed by their customers. The structured process was followed, but the products were not hitting the targets right. There was efficiency, but effectiveness was lost. Neither the companies, nor the customers were happy.

After the World War II, when Japanese economy was struggling, one relatively unknown company in Japan used a totally innovative approach to manage their production processes. They removed the middlemen by bringing customer

representatives into their production teams, who were actually doing the work. And, instead of long structured waterfall-based approaches, they started using iterative processes that build, test, and change their product features rapidly to meet the customer needs. Changes in requirements were not shunned; in fact, they were encouraged. Using this simple, yet innovative approach, they were able to build what was truly needed by the customers. It eliminated everything that did not add value to the process and changed anything that did not go well. Soon that company was able to reduce production costs and adapt itself to the new market realities, much more rapidly than their competition in the marketplace. That company, Toyota, ended up being the global leader in auto industry, essentially ending the U.S. dominance in the world market.

Essence of that innovative approach Toyota used has become the foundation of what is now popularly known as the agile methodology. Project Management Institute (PMI®) has been in the forefront of incorporating relevant key principles of agile into the practice of project management. Agile's popularity has been increasing steadily since 2001, quite arguably creating a paradigm shift in philosophies that drive the discipline. With an increasing number of practitioners willing to adopt key principles of agile methodology to their work environments, a new paradigm is born!

That was just one example of how an innovation can create a paradigm shift. In today's extremely competitive global work environment, in order to ensure our definite arrival at the Project Heavenly gates, we need to be aware of these kinds of shifting paradigms occurring around us. As PMs, we will help ourselves and our customers better, if we pay attention to the paradigm shifts, especially in the industry we are in. We must continue to use the available project management tools, techniques, standards, and best practices. However, identifying the paradigm shifts and adopting what is feasible in our work environment will propel us for higher levels of management excellence.

Examples of Paradigm Shifts

Nobody can give us a complete list of paradigm shifts. It is really up to us as professionals to observe keenly what is happening around us to identify, and embrace applicable paradigm shifts to our advantage. In addition to the agile example described earlier, a few more are discussed.

Efficiency Is not Good Enough any More

Dwindling budgets and fierce global competition are demanding organizations to be not only efficient but also effective in how they employ their resources to meet customer demands. Project efficiency is good and necessary; however, by itself, it is not good enough anymore!

Effectiveness has become far more important than just efficiency. Completing projects on time and under budget is good, however, if the project results are not bringing in the envisioned benefits, today's stakeholders are beginning to consider those projects a failure!

In this era of resource scarcity, efficiency by itself is not valued anymore—unless it brings with it effective outcomes that add value to an organization's bottom line.

Who Works for Whom?

Several years ago, I was working for a major telecommunications company as a project manager. My new senior manager, who was transferred from another department, called me into her office for our first meeting.

After few minutes of pleasantries, she said, “Abe, we will discuss details about your project later after I’ve had a chance to review the background material. But first, I just wanted you to know...you don't work for me.”

“Oh, no! She is firing me even before I started working for her!”, was my thought process. “ ...or maybe she is just transferring me to another department. ”

Noticing my puzzled look, “You don't work for me,” she repeated with a smile. “I work for you!”

I nearly flipped out of my chair. “This is interesting! Did I just get a double promotion?” “was my internal voice going again.

“You see...you are in this position because you are the most qualified person to be in that job. You know what you need to do and how to go about doing your job. I don't need to micro-manage you,” she continued. “My job really is to remove any obstacles you come across in your job. Therefore, I feel like I am working for you, not the other way around!”

“Wow, this is powerful,” I thought. “She is an awesome manager!”

Indeed, she turned out to be an awesome manager for me, because I worked the hardest for her! And produced amazing results at that company! I could not disappoint her and she ended up bringing the very best out of me as an employee. In the conversations that followed, she gave me a big picture of her expectations and trusted me to know fully how to go about doing my job. She supported me completely, and made sure I knew that she was there for me if I ever needed her.

Let's just ponder over that for a minute. A manager looking her subordinate in the eye and saying: You don't work me, I work for you!

Isn't that powerful? That is a new paradigm that can empower both the manager and the subordinate!

There used be a time when a project manager was the king or queen, and has all the powers. Today's reality is different. Especially in a fast-paced world full of highly specialized areas of expertise needed in the work place, skilled team members are at a premium, and have the power to control the outcome of a project! Finding and retaining people with the right set of skills needed for the duration is a key ingredient necessary for the success of the project. Until proven otherwise, this new paradigm

suggests that today's team members need to be empowered to perform their job functions with little or no supervision. As PMs, our role really becomes that of a friend, philosopher, and guide, whose key job function is to support our team members and remove any barriers they encounter.

Innovations

The ever-increasing need to do more with less is spurring innovation at a higher rate today than ever before. New technologies and methodologies are being invented at a faster pace, changing the very landscape of our work environments. New integrated work-collaboration tools, portable electronic devices, shared document storage mechanisms are just a few examples of innovations that are creating the paradigm shifts that impact us. As a result, the expectations that our bosses, colleagues, and customers have from us are also changing. Due to the paradigm shifts, our normal workday does not end when we leave the office any more. We are now connected to our colleagues, customers, and work for more number of hours in a day—through all the new gadgets we carry—thus creating a new set of demands and expectations.

There are global innovations that affect most of work environments, and there are innovations specific to industries. In every industry, leaders are adopting these innovations to gain advantage. In addition, every industry is developing its own best practices of doing business. To stay on the cutting-edge as PMs, we must pay attention to the innovations, understand the expectations that are arising from them, and incorporate the changes that are relevant in our work environment.

Champion PMs continuously scan the global and industry environments for innovations, spot the paradigm shifts occurring as a result, and strive to incorporate what is applicable in their work lives.

A few forces that create paradigm shifts that affect our work lives have been discussed. Paying attention to them is essential for our success.

Reaching the Heavenly Gates

While utilizing the conventional tools and practice standards available to us and by paying attention to the key distinctions discussed (Exhibit 1), we suddenly realize we have actually arrived at Project Management Heaven!

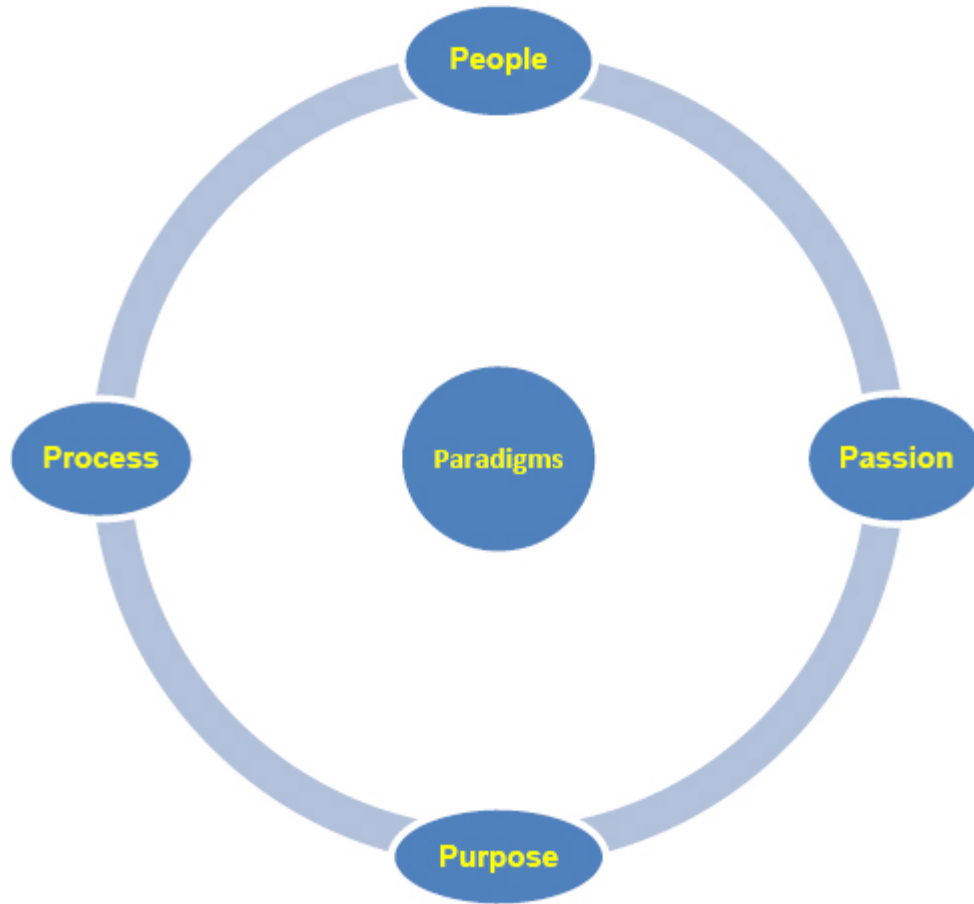


Exhibit 1 – Meer's Five P's for program or project success

In Project Management Heaven, we have enough resources. We have the right people with the right mind-set. They are motivated to produce what is expected of them, passionately marching toward a common destination. All team members are

on the same page, know the common goals, understand the purpose behind the goals, and use a common process to get things done in an efficient and effective manner. Life is good!

This is a life we all can create! It should be our goal to create it in our daily lives.

Summary of Key Distinctions

Subject matter expertise and body of knowledge in every discipline is growing. Program and project management are no different. As professionals, we grow by continuously seeking and learning not only from that new knowledge but also from the lessons learned.

Exhibit 2 provides a summary sheet compiled from experiences—others and mine. For each distinction, it provides a few failure and success factors. Failure factors are those conditions that, if they persist long enough on a project or program, they can potentially lead to disastrous results. Success factors, on the other hand, are those conditions that, if present in a project or program environment, can tremendously increase the chances of success.

Key Distinction	<i>Failure Factors to Avoid or Change</i>	<i>Success Factors to Bring in</i>
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough number of human resources • Not qualified for the role • Lack of organizational loyalty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Human resources available as required ✓ Right skillset & background ✓ Right mind-set
Passion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of motivation • Lack of commitment • Just doing it as a job • Dispassionate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Passionate about the project/program ✓ High level of ownership ✓ High level of energy ✓ Teams having fun working together
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clarity on goals • Cannot relate to the purpose • Stuck in the weeds • Letting barriers stop from moving forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Clear on common goals ✓ Can relate to the true purpose ✓ Not losing sight of the big picture ✓ Finding a way to go around the barriers
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clarity on process or methodology • No commitment to common processes • Presence of rigid processes and structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Single process followed by all ✓ Open to modifying processes if needed ✓ Balancing the importance of end-results with the need to follow the processes
Paradigms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stuck to the ideas not relevant today • Emotional attachment to the past • Resistance to change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Flexibility to adapt new paradigms ✓ Willingness to try new ideas ✓ Balancing the 'old' with the 'new'

Exhibit 2 – Summary of key distinctions for project or program success

As PMs, we must strive to reduce the presence of as many failure factors as possible in our work environments. This will help us avoid serious project or program disasters. However, to increase the probability of success, we must also strive to increase the presence of as many success factors as possible in our project or program environments.

Project Management Heaven

In conclusion, today's program and project managers cannot afford to be just traditional managers in the conventional sense any more. While continuing to utilize the conventional tools and techniques needed, we can face today's challenges better and can achieve more success if we employ the key distinctions discussed. While the conventional tools and techniques help us become technically sound in getting the tasks done, these new distinctions will help propel us to higher levels of management excellence.

Right people...driven by passion...rapidly marching toward a common goal with a purpose that was communicated and understood.. .using a common process and methodology, while adopting a few new paradigms that are applicable!

That sounds like the Project Management Heaven we all want and should strive for. Project Management Institute. (2008). A guide to the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) (4th ed.). Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

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