

The Emotional Project Manager

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Leveraging project management for excellence, growth and transformation



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1.1 Abstract:

What is the role of Emotional Quotient in Project Management? Is this question even relevant – especially when the success of a Project Manager is often directly linked to him/her being an effective task-oriented business manager (in other words, a task-master) than a relationship-oriented one?

Contrast this to the one trait that is most crucial to a Project Manager for being effective i.e. Communication. This is where effective Project Managers spend almost 95% of their time. This is what the stalwarts of project management promote within the hallowed circles of project management practice. The message is loud and clear – communicate, communicate, communicate!

Now when the boundaries of personal and professional spaces are ever-increasingly blurring, the behavioral traits are bound to play an increasing role towards the success or completion of project tasks, more so when the projects are of high-complexity and are long-duration projects.

Thus how will a Project Manager choose to remain a task-master or where is that thin grey line that demarcates the boundaries of one's inner-self that allow them to deal with different parts of their world differently or should we bother to even attempt locating those boundaries. After all, per the EVM principles, it is the end-result that project managers aim for to be achieved through most efficient and optimal efforts. Key still lies in being efficient and optimal. And that is the silver-lining in the cloud – Project Managers no longer need to be emotionless mechanical robots.

1.2 Keywords

Earned Value Management, Emotional Intelligence, Communication, Result Oriented approach

1.3 Introduction

Being an efficient Project Manager requires that the Project Manager follows the Earned Value Management (EVM) approach. *A common operational definition of EVM is “the use of an integrated management system that coordinates work scope, schedule, and cost goals and objectively measures progress toward these goals.”*¹ A traditional EVM approach mandates that the Project Manager remains focused on the periodic progress goals, which often leads the Project Manager to take a mechanical approach for measurement of the progress, as an increasing number of projects tend to add complexity without even changing the scope due to rapid changes in the tools, technology and industry trends. Periodic progress assessment requires that Project Managers have a stern task-oriented approach to ensure that progress is being made and reported. This approach is theoretically in conflict for the fact that human power is the most critical resource for any project and human capital requires nurturing since it works best when it is allowed to flourish naturally. A careful application of Emotional Intelligence not only helps Project Managers avoid this pitfall but also allows them to leverage their most effective resource i.e. human capital.

1.4 People or Task Orientation

The Managerial Grid² model (shown in Figure – 1) by Blake and Moulton identifies the two axes of management as being Task or People Oriented and beautifully defines how the a manager must aim to find the natural balance between the traditional People or Task oriented management styles to ensure that the team remains motivated and empowered to produce results. The ideal scenario is when a committed team is created that is empowered to take ownership. Such a scenario has high People as well as high Task orientation and thus helps produce great results. However, often when it is difficult to create this kind of synergy then the managers are expected to find the 'middle road' that works best for their environments. Desirable still is the band that flows between the middle road and empowered teams which allows the managers to reap benefits by adjusting their management style to suit the current business needs. Since the Functional Teams tend to stay together for elaborated periods of time, the Functional Managers can devise and define what practice works best for each of their resources and in what situations.



Figure 1 The Management Grid model

However, the world is a little different for Project Managers. Most often, they do not have the authority to influence the project teams. While Project Managers are expected to influence and execute without authority, it is not always easy to be able to do that. The reasons are simple – the projects are becoming complex and business demands are increasing and getting more stringent. Each business faces acute pressure of reducing time-to-market for their solutions intended for internal or external customers. These two factors put together force the grid to flatten out as shown in Figure – 2.

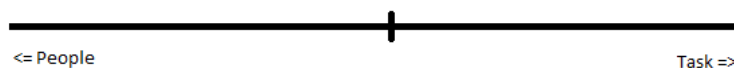


Figure 2 The Flattened Grid

Once the grid is flattened, the Project Managers have no choice but to lean on Task-orientation. After all, it is the Project Manager who is expected to track progress that can be measured per principles of Earned Value Management (EVM).



1.5 Earned Value Management

The reasons for deploying EVM are quite simplistic. Business (Project Stakeholders) wants to know if they are getting the value for the money that they are spending. Furthermore, they want to know if there are any impediments or perceivable risks, and what is being done to prevent them so that they continue to receive value for their money on an ongoing basis.


Therefore, Project Managers must continue to report progress. In order to report progress, they need to ensure that the progress is being made. Thus, they are constantly on the lookout for any possibilities that may disallow people to the tasks that are assigned to them and also that the people are indeed working on the tasks that are assigned to them. They also need to prevent the possibility of misreporting of missed goals being blamed on the lack of resources or non-response from the people and agencies external to stakeholders' business environment.

In order to ensure all of this, Project Managers need to build strong and robust feedback collection traits. They need to be able to not only collect the status but also enable progress often by forcing things to happen. Since people remain the most critical resources therefore they are often challenged by the Project Managers to show progress. This adds to the classic problem. Project Managers need to report progress and if that must happen at the cost of relationship element so it must be. Therefore, before Project Managers know it (and they often don't), they become practitioners of Theory X.³

Gradually, they become remote from their most valued resources for the project i.e. people. This actually aided to the evolution of a new profession called Remote Project Management. Obviously, there are natural pitfalls of this approach. Once people determine that the Project Manager is only interested in the task completion and less interested in how they completed it, they lose interest in going the extra mile or even worse start misreporting progress. Tasks that were previously reported as completed suddenly start reappearing as not completed in the later reviews. Such incidents make the Project Managers even more careful and they start following up even more rigorously since now they suspect that all progress being reported could be a fallacy. Not only this, they will also spend significant amount of time to cross-verify the reported facts. This cross-verification obviously, almost always, circles back to the project teams; and few of them become even further lax thinking that the Project Managers will figure it all out anyway. If we contrast this to the growing complexity of any business environment that the Project Managers have to deal with where there are so many unknowns that even Functional Managers or the SMEs are not fully well aware of, we can see that the Project Managers may very well be running pillar to post and still misreporting progress or true Earned Value.

Agreeably, this cannot be the only quandary responsible for project delays or failures however considering that people will always remain most critical resource, this disconnect will certainly almost always aid to any delays if not failures.

Situations such these leave Project Managers confounded. They have been spending significant amounts of time in communicating with the teams and still they are not able to either ensure progress or estimate what may help in ensuring progress. Obviously, this situation needs to be reversed. There are multiple aspects that can be pursued however Project Managers must need to find a way to connect with the project teams



while still ensuring progress on project tasks. However, in order to connect with the teams, they may not only have to understand their environment and in some cases also understand individual traits. This is not simple considering that project teams are complex, diversified and quite often dispersed. Therefore to accomplish this, they will need to work on developing Emotional Intelligence (EI).

1.6 Emotional Intelligence

Salovey and Mayer define Emotional Intelligence as "The ability to perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions to promote personal growth."⁴ The Abilities AI model will help Project Managers focus on the basic human abilities and how they can gain from careful application of these abilities. These abilities include Perceiving Emotions, Using Emotions, Understanding Emotions and Managing Emotions.

Obviously, the ultimate objective of Project Managers is to execute the project effectively. However, these abilities can help Project Managers tremendously in *connecting* with the project team.

Project Managers still have one challenge though, which is to connect a measurable profession such as Project Management with non-cognitive variety of intelligence. This can be achieved if the Project Managers keep their focus on the effective execution.


1.7 Result Oriented Approach

Realistically, any project shall have some moments of doubts during its life. An effective Project Manager would have been striving since the Project Initiation to uncover any potential risks. Every seasoned Project Manager knows that it requires a committed project team, more than clairvoyance, to discover risks and as well as opportunities for controlling cost and schedule.

Application of EI will help bring focus on two aspects, first being the end result and second that it is people that will help bring closure to pending tasks. EI does aid in bridging these two.

First of all, Project Managers will have to realize even though EVM mandates periodic progress, the ultimate focus still is project completion to the satisfaction of the customers. This fact needs to be socialized with the project team; EI can help significantly in this endeavor by allowing Project Managers to connect instead of sell the idea to the project team. That's the difference. The Project Manager is not aiming to pull the string here for a buy-in however trying to connect with the project team through means of instilling motivation and partnership. Once that connect happens, the Project Manager will bring the team to the tasks at hand for prioritization and closure. This cycle will need to happen iteratively, during formal or informal project reviews, status meetings, social conversations or otherwise. Project Managers will need to connect with the team. EVM mandates monitoring periodic progress however to ensure successful project completion. This connection will need to be made iteratively over the project life-cycle. EI faculties will help Project Managers achieve that.

Benefits of this Result Oriented Approach are multifold. A connected team will help uncovering the risks earlier and then help coming up with mitigation strategies. They will truly own the action items. They will come forward with potential risks information



(early-warnings). Task status shall be a lot more accurate as the team would like to be held accountable for task ownership.

Now when the Project Manager plots the EVM charts, these shall be a lot more accurate and paint a more realistic picture of the current status of the project.

1.8 Conclusion

There is still one question left unanswered which is “what can help Project Manager develop these faculties (AI) that are non-cognitive in nature? In other words, can these be learned?” It is true that AI faculties are non-cognitive however there are some inherent abilities of human nature through use of which Project Managers can improve their abilities to *connect*. Project Managers would need to enhance their awareness of their environments whether these are project, organizational or social. Also, they would need to practice the acceptance of the fact that there would be different levels of contribution due to social, national and political factors. Knowing that they may never be able to engage with the team at a personal level, they need to take full advantage of what lies in the overlapping areas of the environment. Project Managers are not expected to become all-knowing godly creatures. After all, they themselves are human beings and thus would have areas for improvements. However, they can use their human faculties more effectively to ensure that the ‘*connect*’ happens. This shouldn’t be difficult, after all, everyone on the project team wants the project to be successfully completed as per the plan and the charter, and that’s exactly what EVM helps tracking.

1.9 References

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1.10 Author(s) Profile



Vineet has 18 years of experience in delivering IT Solutions. He is a practitioner and researcher of excellence in Project Management. He has managed projects and programs of various sizes in last 15 years. He is currently working as IT Director with Cadence Design Systems in Noida, India.

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