Application of Select Tools of Psychology for Effective Project Management

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1.1 Abstract

A healthy and conducive human dynamics is one of the vital determinants for the success of any project and the same is underlined in the PMBOK, too, in the preamble of chapter 9 on 'Project HR Management' at page 216, fourth edition. An attempt is made to take ahead this concept of human dynamics into the field of psychology to study the intersection of two colossal domains i.e. 'applied psychology' and 'project management'.

This paper identifies the major components from the said two domains where they exhibit a complementary and supplementary roles. Out of forty-two project management processes, ten chosen, based on their deep concern about human resources, are: 4.3 Direct and manage project execution, 4.4 Monitor and control project work, 5.1 Collect requirements, 5.2 Define scope, 6.6 Control schedule, 9.3 Develop project team, 9.4 Manage project team, 10.1 Identify stakeholders, 10.4 Manage stakeholders' expectations and 11.6 Monitor and control risks. Three tools selected, from psychology to collaborate with these ten processes, are Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Transactional Analysis (TA), Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT).

The collaboration is brought to bear on expectations management and conflict resolution among the various people belonging to project team and project stake holders.

1.2 Keywords

Project Management, Psychology, REBT, TA, MBTI

1.3 Introduction

"If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are." Zen proverb

World has been buzzing with innumerable projects with project teams are striving to accomplish their goals with all effectiveness and efficiency. In this mission, they bring to bear their knowledge, skills and energies to mobilize and utilize the resources to transform the plans into the end objective. While the palpable aspects of scope, time and cost as well as intangibles like quality and risk are in the limelight, the basic ingredient of HR viz. 'people' element of workforce is seldom considered in the light of intra- and inter-personal paradigms. This paper focuses exactly there and introduces the select tools from applied psychology that are of immense help to project manager and other stake holders in cashing the merits and overcoming the demerits of individual mindsets for effective project execution.

Psychology – the discipline devoted to study of human behavior and mental functions – is a pervasive subject touching all aspects of human endeavour and project management is not an exception. Though the rigour of psychology spans across human cognition, logic, emotion and behavior, thus covering both the intra-person and inter-personal processes, for the sake of this paper addressing the practicing project personnel, the focus is kept mainly on interaction – either the exchange of words or the team work. Irrespective of the degree of sophistication and automation associated

with any project, it is beyond doubt that human factor can make or mar a project, with its gifted traits of innovation, discretion, aspirations, etc. It is therefore pertinent for the project workforce, especially the project manager, to appreciate the basic applied psychology.

Readers well-versed with PMBOK will appreciate the following broad rubric that is used in this paper. There are nine knowledge areas covering forty-two project management processes, each specifying a set of inputs, outputs, and the tools and techniques for the concerned processing. Twenty out of about 150 such tools and techniques relate to human interaction and they are spread across two major project management processes, viz. #5 Project Scope Management & #9 Project HR Management. Again, out of these twenty tools and techniques, few ones like observation and interpersonal skills are repeatedly occurring across multiple processes, underlining the need for project manager to be conversant with the psychological studies presented in the next few section. From out of umpteen theories and practices in the field of psychology, we discuss the three major ones viz. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) and Transactional Analysis (TA). A quick account of personality disorders provided at the end of the paper would also come handy for the project manager in her day-today interactions.

1.4 MBTI

Roots of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) could be traced back to the theory of psychological types put forth by renowned psychologist Carl Jung, who posited the existence of two mutually independent pairs of cognitive functions: pair one is rational functions viz. thinking and feeling, whereas the second pair is irrational functions viz. sensing and intuition. Further, Jung also advocated that these functions are manifested in an introverted or extraverted manner. Carrying ahead Jung's theory, Briggs and her daughter Myers expanded it and formulated the MBTI assessment.

MBTI takes into account four dimensions, each showing two values; one of these traits is domineering or preferred over the other in our personalities. These four pairs are as follows:

- Attitudes – Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I)

- This shows whether a person is turned more toward outward or inward. An extravert would be more comfortable with actions, persons and concrete objects than an introvert who would like abstract concepts and ideas.

- Rational functions – Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F)

- It stands for the way one judges or weighs the facts and priorities to arrive at some decision. A thinker would go more by logic and reason with an unbiased outlook, while an emotional person gets along with the people with a true empathy.

- Perceiving functions – Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N)

- Data capture is the subject of the perceiving functions. Sensing, as the name indicates, is the way of gathering the tangible information using five senses. On the other hand, the intuition works more like premonition that is colloquially labeled as the sixth sense.

- Life Style – Judging (J) vs. Perception (P)

- This is an enhancement to Jung's theory by Meyers and Briggs who propose that the behaviour exhibited by earlier three pairs gets a change in its flavour a bit, based on this pair.

- It is then obvious that there could be as many as 16 personality types that MBTI enunciates. They are: ISTJ, ISTP, ISFJ, ISFP, INFJ, INFP, INTJ, INTP, ESTP, ESTJ, ESFP, ESFJ, ENFP, ENFJ, ENTP and ENTJ. In this compact paper embracing most of the over-arching tenets, it is not possible to describe all the 16 types, so just two of them (ENFP and ISTJ) are picked up for more discussion from the standpoint of project management showing where they would fit best in a project environment.

1.5 Personality Type ENFP

A person assessed as ENFP (i.e. extraversion, intuition, feeling & perception) banks on external world for resourcefulness as basically she is extravert in nature. She therefore likes to interact with people, is fond of external events, comfortable in tackling the patterns and possibilities, centers the decisions around personal values. Besides, she shows flexibility, listens to her new insights, is creative and ready to explore new concepts, may neglect details and plans, but works towards a general goal. Generally an effective change champions with deep perception of possibilities, she works as a powerhouse spreading waves of energy and initiative, encouraging others around her for action. She prefers the start-up stage of a mission, and is relentless in chasing the new interests. Capable of guessing the others' needs she is ready for help and appreciation. Full of joy and liveliness, she brings to bear her charisma on the office work as well.

It would then be a natural choice of any organization to deploy such an ENFP person for initiating the projects.

1.6 Personality Type ISTJ

Let's now turn to the other variety where all the four facets of personality are exactly complementing the project leader we saw in the last section. An ISTJ person (i.e. introversion, sensing, thinking and judging) draws her energy from within herself with her thoughts and ideas. A very well organized, sincere and calm individual, she has logical bend of mind, likes facts and figures, follows the organizational structure, adheres to the laid down procedural framework and is ready to take on unexpected events with her nice comprehension of life that generally goes unobserved by others. With her hard work, she manages to accomplish the task and strives to say within the time deadlines and resource limits.

As readers would guess, a team of ISTJ persons would be a great asset to the project execution phases where the implementation prefers such go-getters.

The above points would come handy when the project staffing is being planned/ executed during the process of 'Acquire project team' done at #9.2 of PMBOK, particularly the two tools of negotiation and acquisition. Here, the project manager can utilize her insight of MBTI to mix and match the available human resources against the yardsticks of the relevant MBTI types. Many organizations get MBTI assessment administered for their staff; Others should follow the suit so that project managers can draw upon the assessment for benefit of their respective projects. Apart from the two types discussed earlier – viz. ENFP and ISTJ which are orthogonally opposite traits –

there are several other combinations having specific suitability/ potential for a task on hand.

1.7 REBT

Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy or Theory (REBT) was developed in the 1950s, by Dr. Albert Ellis one of the most influential psychologist of the last century. After disillusioned with the psychoanalysis, he was looking for rationalistic theory for cognition and behaviour. After a careful reflection on the lines of thinking he himself had been practicing in meeting the challenges he faced in his own life for a few decades, he realized that one's behavior is dominated more by own beliefs than by actual stimulus. This prompted him to formalize his REBT which he initially called merely RET (Rational Emotive Therapy).

One of the central themes of REBT is that a person gets happy (or unhappy) not merely due to an outside event. His/ her belief system plays a still major role in deciding about that resultant happiness (or unhappiness, or some other feeling). Ellis quotes a simple example to make his point. Let's visualize a traveler on a city bus making a ferry in a busy metro at peak hours. While getting down at his destination, this person bumps on the footboard of the bus with another fellow passenger. It's possible that differing reactions could come from various persons in such a suffering situation. If it were James, he may curse the fellow passenger for the negligence, pity himself over the fateful day and carry forward that same negative feeling for rest of the day. Instead, some other person in his role, say John, may take it easy and forget that unpleasant episode within a few minutes. Furthermore, some other still more positive person, say Jack, may take it in proper spirit. His self-talk could be 'It's really a good fortune that I didn't fall down and that no belongings were lost or damaged'. Thus the consequences (labeled 'C') of the same activating event (labeled 'A') may be different for different persons based on their belief system (labeled 'B'). One cannot change 'A' that has already happened, but by modifying 'B' through persistent introspective efforts on the self, 'C' could be ameliorated, at least for future events. Ellis then moves forward to advocate disputing (labeled 'D') with which the concerned person may be induced to confront his own thinking to bring it to a right and positive track, thus establishing (labeled 'E') the proper belief system. This is well-known A-B-C-D-E chain of REBT.

REBT proposes a few more interesting thought nuggets. Firstly, it appeals to our minds to differentiate between a demand and an expectation. A demand is mostly unilateral, dogmatic and without any consideration for the timeframe, circumstances and other party, while an expectation values these factors in a realistic manner and hence is bilateral and flexible in nature. Secondly, REBT highlights human thinking pitfall of 'All-or-None', where one tends to grumble about unfavourable conditions, postponing some actions and waits indefinitely for the environment to turn conducive for the mission undertaken. Such procrastination may happen in a very subtle fashion for small tasks but eventually hamper the larger picture to a considerable extent. REBT confronts this attitude and encourages us to keep on performing our small steps that lead to the desired goal in the longer run. Personalization is one more logical fallacy underlined by REBT. This is when occasionally some unexpected, undesired or unpleasant event occurs, a layman may fall prey to this fallacy and blame himself as if he was totally accountable for it. As a matter of fact, most of the times an organizational work is a juggernaut task and apportionment of the responsibility of failure would be scattered among many members and factors, but some sensitive team mates would indulge in too much self-blaming and guilt feeling that simply mars the overall efficacy. Yet another point of REBT is over generalization where one

attributes lot of proportion, almost the entire weight, to a single causal factor by somehow ignoring the remaining factors that are equally, if not more, responsible for the result being assessed. Thus, it is commonly complained by labeling some factor solely and squarely e.g. all cab drivers behave like this, all females are weak, all street hawkers are deceptive, etc. These thinking fallacies pointed out by Dr. Ellis in his REBT are as valuable as the mainstay A-B-C-D-E causal chain.

A crisp theory as it appears, REBT has been a phenomenal success not only in psychotherapy for treating mental disorders, but also in shaping a pertinent philosophy of life in general for psychologically sound people to move ahead in their missions and to realize their full potential. Let's try to extrapolate it to the domain of project management.

A typical project involves the project team led by the project manager and other stake holders like sponsors, beneficiaries, review/ audit teams, etc. All these human beings keep on interacting with each other for requirements gathering, scope finalization, project team selection, operational tactics, execution monitoring, reporting etc. It's natural that during such interaction, all the persons would hardly be in exact synchronization with the other person's thoughts and feelings. In any meeting, the participants generally carry motley of their individual mindsets: One may seem to be reluctantly cold, another aggressively pushy, the third fellow emotionally dry, fourth person harsh with excessive logic, yet another too sensitive or too sentimental. It is a healthy habit of harnessing the REBT to keep off the unnecessary influence from polluting one's own rational belief system. If such care is not taken, the line of thinking on the subject matter may get easily distracted toward the manner in which the point is made by other person or even the stance/ mindset of that other person. In either case, the result is that in the mind of the receiver, the discussion contents would get glued with the subjective angle projected by the other person. At the best, it may amount to a distorted communication; at the worst, it may sow the seeds of animosity among the team members that is detrimental to the project.

It will be therefore prudent step for all the persons contributing to a project – irrespective of their capacity as manager, team member, sponsor, beneficiary, etc. – to get grounding on how to build, cultivate and use an objective, work-centered and positive outlook while engaging in the discussions. Better still, the project's own belief system could be collaboratively developed with overarching project philosophy and priorities, which may then be disseminated to the grassroots so that all the communication within the project ambit is seen in that light. Needless to say, there would be more fitting applications of REBT for the project manager in all the processes under the knowledge area of 'Project HR management' (#9 of PMBOK) and process 10.4 of 'Manage stakeholders' expectations' under the knowledge area 'Project Communications management' (# 10 of PMBOK). As a corollary, this topic of face-to-face communication should be extrapolated to the telephonic and written communication, too, to help nurture healthy practices in the virtual team environment.

1.8 Transactional Analysis (TA)

Around middle of last century Dr. Eric Berne – a Canada-born American psychiatrist – propounded this scintillating theory. TA is a neo-Freudian theory of personality asserting that every individual has validity, importance and equality of respect. As a human being, with capacity to think, one decides own destiny and it is possible to shape these decisions. Berne suggests that there are three ego states all human beings assume from time to time like changing hats. These are 'Parent', 'Child' and 'Adult'. He explains how individuals interact with one another, and how the ego states

affect each dialogue or 'transaction'. Transactional analysis thus aims at adeptly analyzing the way one talks with another to understand the mindset in the first place and then to choose the fitting strategy to complete that transaction in the best possible manner for the optimum outcome.

A parent mode is one where people behave, feel, and think in reaction to an unconscious imitation of how their parents (or other elderly people) acted. They also try to go by the interpretation of their parent's actions. For example, a frustrated person may yell because he vaguely recalls how some influential figure in his childhood used to cry out. A parent mode is caring, pampering, scolding and imbibes values. In a child mode, one thinks, feels and therefore behaves the way he did in childhood. So, a person who receives a pink slip at office may respond by looking at the floor, and crying or pouting, as he did when he used to receive scolding as a child. Likewise, a person who receives a good grade may respond with a broad smile and a joyful gesture of thanks. The 'child' is the source of emotions, creation, recreation, spontaneity and intimacy. Finally, the 'adult' mode is a matured condition without any undue influence of emotions like pity, fear, favour or remorse; somewhat comparable to a computer program that processes data objectively. Sharpening the adult is an obvious objective of TA.

TA further highlights a few types of transactions. The first type is reciprocal (also called complementary). Here, both the conversing persons are in one and the same ego state. Such an exchange of words may continue for a while without any hassles. The second variety is a crossed transaction wherein the two persons are in two different modes, e.g. one talks to other in a straight way assuming adult mode, but other perceives it as if he were a child. This would obviously entangle the communication. It is worth noting that if the child or parent mode is responded with adult mode reaction, it would turn out to be a better and positive dialogue. Then there is third transaction type called duplex (also called covert mode), where the explicit conversation occurs in parallel with an implicit psychological self talk. This may involve a shrewd use of body language or punch on some word giving the dialogue a hidden meaning, or joining two un-connected sentences to induce an unexpected interpretation. Readers may try out mapping of such transactions on various combinations of 'I am/ am not OK', 'You are/ are not OK'.

Each one of us assumes one of the three modes and keeps it changing from time to time based on the environmental stimulus. Grand may it seem, but it is not advisable to put on any single mode all the time, even the cap of 'adult'. When a person next to you is joking and kidding in the lighter mood, your parent mode may be taken as too serious, scolding and therefore hurting. Instead, you can think of strategically switching to the 'child' mode for a while to reciprocate and rejuvenate. Each one has a child in the heart that is gratified with a bit of pampering and if you fulfill such a need you get some credit in your emotional bank account that could be later used for the project benefit by seeking an extra mile from that person. After a while, you may put off the 'child' mask and smoothly return to your adult mode, equally bringing the other person round the point to get to work. There are further niceties, e.g. 'adapted' child, 'free' child, 'nurturing' parent, 'critical' parent, etc. that could not be elaborated here for want of space. But, it would be necessary to introduce another concept from TA parlance called 'games' that imply a complicated transaction where the latent meaning of the communication is quite different from the words spoken. Consider for example an employee sarcastically touting his colleague as 'loyal than the king and pious than the pope' where the exaggeration and body language may suggest exactly opposite. Such 'games' are routinely played by people. Readers would be amused to note that etymological roots of this commonplace word go back to 'Games people play', a bestseller Dr. Eric Berne wrote in 1960s.

Bringing the TA to the domain of project management, the project manager would be justified to pay minute attention to the games the people around her play, to ferret out the true tenor of communication and to respond with the right strategy by putting on the suitable cap of an 'adult', 'parent' or a 'child'. Firstly, if such games are not sensed, the other party would certainly win and the game would be over. Secondly, if the project manager retaliates bluntly with an explicit 'tit for tat' policy, it may perturb the work environment. In either case the project would stand to suffer. Instead, if the transaction is analyzed minutely, a strategy could be devised to initially coax and cajole that person for a while, followed by a discreet response signaling him that his contemplations are comprehended but not conceded. This ensures that the prank is weeded out, but the prankster is not hurt.

1.9 Personality Disorders (PD)

Finally we touch upon this bit delicate topic. For the beginners of psychology, it might be a new phenomenon to learn that out of dozens of mental disorders, personality disorders are the mild and boundary cases where one's nature and nurture makes that person a bit odd – just marginally – from the perfectly acceptable social behavior. These are inflexible and maladaptive personality traits interfering with day-to-day functioning, but are not too serious in nature and hence not termed as psychiatric disorders let alone psychotic cases. Behaviour of an individual with personality disorder differs slightly from cultural expectations in more than one of the following areas, viz. cognition, emotion, social functioning, and impulse control. Unfortunately, for most of those who suffer from any PD, there is no insight about it and they carry it on till end of life, as there are limited chances of improvement.

PD's are pervasive pattern of behavior marked consistently over a period of time and show many varieties, e.g. Baseless suspicion that others are exploiting, harming or deceiving (Paranoid PD), detachment from social relationships and a restricted range of expression of emotions (Schizoid PD), disregard for and violation of the rights of others (Antisocial PD), instability of interpersonal relationships, confused self-image and marked impulsivity with occasional suicidal thoughts (Borderline PD), excessive emotionality, dramatized behaviour and attention seeking (Histrionic PD), grandiose sense of self-importance (Naricissistic PD), social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation (Avoidant PD), excessive need to be taken care of, leading to submissive and clinging behavior and fears of separation (Dependent PD). These telling symptoms highlight the behavioural issues of the person suffering from such a PD. Readers would certainly, quickly and easily map some of these PD's with some of their acquaintances, colleagues and relations. In fact, the PD's are the clear examples of how mental illness is a matter of degree, rather than a distinctive case. When exactly, for example, do you label someone as crazy rather than creative is a very thin line.

Project team should appreciate that a personality disorder is a true handicap of the suffering person and if at all a change could be brought about, it would be very minimal. Unless due care is taken, such a person would become either a laughing stock or a quarrel ignition. In the course of project, it is worth of its while for project team to bear with such a team member with a magnanimity and to ensure that their limitation does not affect interpersonal communication and in turn the project success. Creative thinking would go a long way in making best use of these affected persons by providing some sort of protected environment, e.g. a person suffering from histrionic PD could be confined to back office tasks avoiding/ minimizing public contact, one enduring schizoid PD would be good at dry and drab number crunching in finance,

another bearing an dependent PD should be kept off from being in charge of even a small section and should always be put in a second/ third in command.

If the above articulation develops an interest for psychology among project managers, that would be a first step of applying the psychological theories and tools to project management. Those who are keen to know more about applied psychology would find the references at the end of this paper quite useful. The best step for a project manager would be to undergo some short course on 'psychological counseling' to learn the ropes and in turn to transfer that knowledge to fellow team mates, eventually leading to effective and efficient execution of projects.

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1.11 Author's Profile

Working at crossroads of management, psychology, IT and executive coaching, Pramod Damle has been balancing his career between practice and preaching for past three decades. A freelance researcher, adviser & professor, earlier he held corporate positions like Director, Business Unit Head, academic ones like Professor & HoD, Distinguished Fellow and contributed to corporate giants like State Bank, L&T, IBM and academia of IIMs, Symbiosis, ASCI, NIA, Pune Univ. Having received instructions in Maths, Banking, Laws, IT/IS & Psychology and acquired a host of certifications and a PhD, he guides the students of PG/ PhD.

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