

- Interviewer- **Narendra Madnani**
- Interviewee- **Namrata Malkani**
- Place of employment- **Infosys**

## **INTERVIEW**

**Namrata:** How many years of experience do you have?

**Narendra:** I have 16 years in the workforce and in Infosys, in total. 5 years as a Project Manager/Program Manager, the current position. Before that I had been Team Lead in a number of projects and I started out as a Software Developer.

**Namrata:** Ok. What really is the difference between program manager and project manager?

**Narendra:** A program manager is similar to project manager but there are larger sets of objectives and responsibilities. These are bigger projects or a group of projects.

**Namrata:** What roles and responsibilities do you have to shoulder as a project manager?

**Narendra:** As a manager one must be clear about planning, budget, scope. This is applicable at the beginning of the project. But then one has to continue managing these aspects later on as well. Client deliverables must be all fulfilled, keeping a track of team members' performance, the work done must fulfil the amount of budget allocated. Good team connect needs to be ensured, and for every particular project, I must ensure that people with right set of skills are involved. Planning and a good tracking of dynamic plans, risk management are also crucial parts.

**Namrata:** That is a lot of responsibility. And how many people do you have under you?

**Narendra:** The number of team members changes with the project. In last 5 years I have managed 5-6 projects. The number can vary from 30-40 to even 5-6 people. Even in my project there are smaller teams, each directed by a Team Lead who manages a small group of people, that I do not co-ordinate directly. But I delegate the responsibilities to the team lead who distributes it within his team. Maximum number of direct sub-ordinates I have had is 15-17 and

direct+ indirect is 30-35. In my current project I am managing 12-13 people directly.

**Namrata:** So, you have certainly managed a lot of people so far over the last 5 years.

**Narendra:** Yes, but you see, you get a particular role only after you have already spent a significant time proving your metal for it. As for me, I had been given the task of training freshers within a few years as a developer. And slowly I began taking more roles, like becoming Team Lead and managing a small group withing a project. So, I started shouldering the roles and responsibilities of a manager long before officially becoming one.

**Namrata:** I see. Could you give me five specific instances of people, you found challenging to manage? What was the challenge and how did you eventually deal with it?

**Narendra:** Ok, it will take me a while to recall all the cases over the last 16 years or so.

So, this is one. When I worked onsite in Netherlands, a current project manager had faced some challenges and was not able to perform so he moved out and I was available in the project manager capacity so I was asked to become the program manager and take his place. But in this team, there were already few people who were senior to me- in terms of designation and year of experience. Because every senior person is not a project manager. For example, a principal consultant, a technology architect or a process specialist. So, a person with decades worth of technical skills but just because they are very experienced doesn't mean they will be offered managerial position because that demands a different skill set, and it so happens, that sometimes a person with less years of experience then them and a lower designation gets the managerial role and now has to manage them as well.

So, when you get this kind of job which involves managing people senior to you, some of those people don't feel good about it because of various personal and professional reasons. But at the end of the day, you have to assign work to people, track the progress and take actions when the deadlines or the quality are not sufficiently met. And this was a main challenge I faced here. There were 2 senior people here – a technology architect with 20 years of experience and a person in the business domain – principal consultant. It was difficult to manage because they had their own mindset and at times their objective and

project objective were not aligned, and they were finding it hard to acknowledge or accept this. For example, you ask them to design or develop something because the project demands it but he has a different objective and he doesn't feel like this is right and wants to develop something else.

**Namrata:** So how did you deal with this situation?

**Narendra:** Ideally you would want to understand their views and concerns, communicate your side, have one-on-one meetings among other things. You can make them feel valued and take them with yourself in the objective, so all of that was tried. But sometimes some people have genuine people issues and it doesn't work out. Hence sometimes you have to reach out to your own senior. So, this was the alternative- I reached out to a very senior person, who really understood the criticality of this project. He evaluated the situation for himself. We eventually distributed the responsibilities of those senior guys in the existing members or by introducing new team members. This is an eventual process, it took months. Eventually they moved out of that project.

**Namrata:** Ok. Are there more such people related issues that you have dealt with in a managerial capacity?

**Narendra:** There is one common case we have to deal with, which is people wanting rewards very quickly- like onsite assignment, salary, promotions. Onsite is client location. Some team is India, some in US. There's exposure and monetary benefits.

**Namrata:** How do you tackle this?

We try to explain the situation. Some understand some don't. Those people try to create problems in work. They chug responsibility. Again, the necessary actions are taken. In those cases, you can reflect it in appraisal rating. Some understand them some don't. In that case you have to move them out of the project, sometimes they themselves leave and go work somewhere else.

**Namrata:** Ok, any particular instance of such or other manner of shrugging responsibility due to issues, and how you dealt?

**Narendra:** There is not too many specific things I remember. See, company has a lot of rules and policies and in general people abide by them. There's not often that a nuisance is found in case of people management.

There's one case I remember having as a Team Lead though. This was many years back. And there was a new hire in my group, who wasn't very attentive

or willing to learn things. Initially he wouldn't come for many days, he would often message that he's sick and can't come. But eventually we found he was coming to the office and not for the project work as the office campus is really huge. There are 30-35k people, so it's not possible to find. We had, I and the project manager, tried to talk to him and give reprimanding. When it didn't stop, the project manager reported to the HR. So, then some disciplinary action was taken against him. He was put on a performance review eventually.

**Namrata:** Okay, would you like to talk about any more challenges faced in managing people, specific or general if you like?

**Narendra:** Yes, I would rather go general instead of specific instances. Because what I am saying is that things are not straight forward. Because there's not black and white. There are well-defined policies in the company and people generally behave very professionally.

Other general things we face is Lack of accountability. Making issues, not ready to commit to the work. Suppose in general, there are 10 people in a team and 6-7 are great, 2-3 are average and maybe 1 person who doesn't pull his end. As such you sit them down and talk. You keep a track of them more closely. You evaluate their progress and not just based on your perception. There are right scientific tools that allow you to do that in a definite manner. So, after all this, some people realize and they improve. If that fails, there is a department in the organization to take care of those issues, this is performance improvement department.

**Namrata:** Well, listening to this I can say very balanced and nice person, coz you refrained from giving pin-pointed cases and keep discussion on a general side.

**Narendra:** Well, thank you, that's for you to say. But being nice doesn't mean you have to go soft on your objectives. Sometimes you have to be hard on people. But the thing is project management is scientific process + art. That art is manager specific and, in a way, very novel. What has worked well for me is team connect. Sympathetic, and knowing and acknowledging what challenges they are facing even if they sound trivial to begin with.

**Namrata:** So, you can say that the journey of program manager has been mostly fulfilling, there aren't many people issues as such or at least not central in the grand scheme of things.

**Narendra:** You see, it has been fulfilling and I certainly consider my job satisfying, but most of the challenges for a project manager are on project delivery. You are talking on people side of management. We have projects because there is a common objective that needs to be achieved. What affects things majorly is are we able to achieve the objective or not. Are we delivering the right thing, with the right quality parameters, at the right time or not? The biggest part of project management is this. The main challenge comes when you fail to deliver something. It was failure of an intermediate milestone. Sometimes people leave, sometimes your team doesn't have the right skill to deliver something. Those are the major problems a project manager faces. Sometimes customer comes and says this new part needs to be added and delivered next month, but I don't have money, can you do it out of goodwill for free? We truly have had such cases as well. In such cases we discuss internally what should be done.

**Namrata:** Ok, I see failure of timeline is the most important challenge to deal with? If you would like to elaborate on that?

**Narendra:** There are a number of reasons it happens. Sometime scope is not clear, real life projects are dynamic in nature, the scopes and objectives keep changing and you have to be vigilant. Sometimes budget is not sufficient. Complex projects have many stakeholders, so it's very important to have the right method of communication. The higher the level, the more diluted and convoluted the communication.

**Namrata:** So finally, suppose a colleague who has been newly assigned the role of a project manager seeks advice. What tips would you like to give for effective management?

**Narendra:** Track of planning, progress, project scope and objective. One should be ready for changes and be on their toes.

- a. Very clear understanding of objective. There are many ways in which one can get diverted.
- b. Be clear about the scope of things. Make a board of planning, it should be dynamic, improve, and evolve with time.
- c. Define milestones and track them very well every week, be on your toes.
- d. Don't let the objective get diverted, as much as possible. Have some plans to deal with risks that are bound to come. Risk management is essential throughout.

- e. Team connect is very useful, at the end the members are running the team. Involve them in the objective and make them a part of process. Let them do it in their own style and try to keep an open door.

**Namrata:** Thank You for taking out the time to conduct this long interview with me. It has proved very useful to my understanding of managerial roles in a technical organization.

**Narendra:** Absolutely, no problem. This is the first time I have been interviewed actually. This was a good experience.