Recognising an Excellent Project Manager

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Introduction

Effective project management behaviour, the ability to deliver projects successfully, is of particular interest to professional bodies of project management, project managers and their employers for four main reasons:

- to promote the recognition of project managers as professionals, experts in their field with standards similar to accountants, surveyors, and doctors;
- to help individual project managers develop skills and professional recognition;
- to assist the new breed of part-time or occasional project managers to learn what they need to perform adequately; and
- to help employers identify, develop and support more managers capable of managing projects.

To some extent a professional Body of Knowledge is limited by what its practitioners consider can be assessed: the portfolio of demonstrable skill, the list of projects on the resumé, the tools mastered and certifications won. Professional bodies tend to avoid including less easily defined interpersonal competencies although a competent practitioner would exhibit them. However, the Association for Project Management has always recognised in its Body of Knowledge the need for interpersonal skills and shrewd behaviour in the high performing project manager (APM, 1999).

This paper describes the author's empirical, qualitative, cross company and cross industry study of twenty three project managers, recommended to her by their organisations as competent or superior performers. The behaviours which were reported confirm many of the 40 key competencies of the APM BoK but taken together show the project manager creating a project network in which s/he is the obligatory passage point, the channel through which the project activities must pass (Callon, 1986).

An Overview of Competence

A brief synopsis of the competency movements

There are two main schools of thought in the competence field, the Standards and the Behavioural. Their ideas about competence spring on the one hand from looking at what skills are required to do a particular job, and on the other at what a skilled person can do. This difference of focus between the job and the person is fundamental. The differences are summarised in Exhibit 1.

Behavioural model: "Competencies"	**Standards model: "Competences"**
Focused on the individual, the superior performer in the role	Focused on the job and on the minimum competence levels
Aims to predict competent behaviour	Sets criteria for recognition or accreditation of competent performance
Competencies can be motives, traits, self-concepts, attitudes or values, content knowledge or cognitive or behavioural skills.	Competences are standards of performance which are recognised by some writers to draw on knowledge and understanding on the one hand and personal characteristics on the other
Mainly US and UK	Mainly UK, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, some US bodies
Favoured by companies	Favoured by governments and professional and trade associations

Exhibit 1: Comparison of behavioural and standards models of competence/ competency

The Behavioural Model

The behavioural competency movement started with Harvard psychologist, David McClelland (1973), who identified principles for doing research to identify competency variables which did predict job performance and which were not biased (or at least, less biased) by race, sex or socio-economic factors (Spencer et al 1994). He adopted the use of criterion samples: comparing people clearly successful in their jobs with persons less successful in order to identify thoughts and behaviours causally related with success (Spencer et al 1994). In particular McClelland (McClelland, Dailey, 1973) showed that traditional academic examinations did not predict job performance or success in life and were often biased against minorities, women and poorer people. For example, he looked at US diplomats and found that neither the General Aptitude Test Battery nor the General Background Knowledge Test

scores predicted future success on the job but that the differentiating characteristics of the better diplomats were cross-cultural interpersonal sensitivity and maintenance of positive expectations of others despite provocation, coupled with speed in learning political networks. (Spencer et al, 1994)

Boyatzis (1982) developed McClelland's ideas further and defined effective performance as the attainment of specific results (outcomes) through specific actions while maintaining the policies, procedures and conditions of the organisational environment. He also distinguished between *threshold competencies* and *superior competencies*. Threshold competencies are those essential to performing a job in a minimally adequate way but which do not lead to superior performance: for example, speaking the native language of subordinates; using project management software. Superior competencies mark out the high flyers (Finn, 1993).

Knowledge, skills, self-concepts (attitudes or values), motives and traits are all considered competencies in the behavioural model (Spencer et al 1994). Knowledge by itself appears rarely to distinguish superior from average performer and is thus classified as a threshold competency (Finn, 1993). Skills can be both cognitive and behavioural (Spencer et al 1994). Self-concepts relate to what people value, how they see themselves and what they are interested in. Motives are the underlying need or thought patterns which drive, direct and select an individual's behaviour. McClelland (1987) identified the need for Achievement, the need for Power and the need for Affiliation as the three most important motives. A trait is a general disposition to behave or respond in a certain way, such as self-confidence, self-control and resilience under stress (Kobasa et al, 1982). Motives and traits are most deeply embedded in personality: knowledge and skills are the behaviours that can be changed most easily — but only if the person is sufficiently motivated (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Recruitment, however, is often centred on knowledge and skills, although underlying values, attitudes, traits and motives may be of greater significance in distinguishing the superior performers (Spencer et al 1994).

The Standards Model

The work of McClelland has been largely ignored by the publicly-funded competence movement in the United Kingdom (Adams, 1996) where the occupational standards programme of the Department for Education and Employment and the work of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) are pre-dominant. This approach stemmed from a historical concern with establishing *minimum* competence standards for certification and licensing (Eraut, 1994). The focus is on job-oriented functional analysis which has been used to break down the roles and tasks of an occupation to small elements (Finn, 1993). Then each element of competence is matched up to performance criteria to indicate the minimum level of competence. The resulting analysis shows all the activities or outcomes a job-holder will demonstrate in that job. Levels of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) have also been set which are claimed to demonstrate standards from technical and clerical to managerial levels across professions and occupational groups. In Australia as well at least twenty professions, including the Australian Institute of Project Management (Crawford, 1997), are developing competence standards in response to a government initiative (Stretton, 1995). Following the classification adopted by Gonczi et al (1990), a profession needs to define the knowledge, skills and attitudes of its practitioners and to have set standards as the criteria for measuring their performance (outcome competencies).

Synthesis: an integrated competency model?

There have been attempts (e.g. Finn, 1993; Robinson, 1996) to integrate the two models. It is suggested here that a distinction be drawn between potential competencies (behavioural) and actual competence (outcomes). On the potential side there are skills and values, both innate and learned, driven by the impetus of motivation. Experience (of working on real projects) is the filter through which innate and learned abilities act to produce outcomes. These outcomes feed knowledge and understanding which then support and underlie the development of increasing abilities and their application to new experiences. This is supported by the learning theories put forward by Boyatzis and Kolb (1995).

What excellent project managers do

The Project Management Bodies and Competence

Project management is no exception to the professions which have tended to adopt the standards approach to competence. For example, National Competency Standards for Project Management have been developed (Stretton, 1995) under the auspices of the Small Business Management Competencies Standards Body with sponsorship by the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM, 1996). These standards are organised according to the nine knowledge areas defined by the US Project Management Institute's Body of Knowledge (1996).

The AIPM also recognises the need to assess knowledge, skills and attitudes in accrediting its professionals. It currently assesses Project Managers by attribute based inferences: skills are assessed by a project report, knowledge by a written examination, and attitudes by an interview. Now the AIPM competency standards are available, they intend to combine these existing assessments

with work-based assessments by the employer (Stretton, 1995). Further research into these competencies is in progress (Crawford, 1997).

The behaviours and attitudes required of professional project managers have mostly been defined by experts rather than derived from analysis of excellent practitioners. Turner (1996) does not discuss personal competencies although they are included in the Association for Project Management Body of Knowledge (APM BoK). The 1995 edition of the APM BoK (1995) listed the personal characteristics of a Certificated Project Manager as including: attitude, common sense, open-mindedness, adaptability, inventiveness, prudent risk taker, fairness, commitment: "Personal characteristics necessary to fulfil the function of a project manager will be given very high priority in assessing whether a member of the APM can use the designation Certificated Project Manager."

However, there is little empirical evidence to support the APM list which has recently undergone revision (Morris, 1998; APM 1999). Andersen et al (1987), Turner (1993), Turner et al (1996) and Rees et al (1996), have all reported the identification of six traits for effective project managers: problem-solving ability and results orientation, energy and initiative, self-assured personality, sense of perspective, good communications skills and negotiating skills. Pettersen (1991) used the literature to draw up a list of predictors for selecting effective project managers and equated performance with a combination of abilities, motivation and personality. Jessen (1992) listed the characteristics of an effective project manager as: creativity, innovation, new way of thinking, ability to define concrete aims and objectives for work output, skills in planning and organising task production, ability to establish priorities and make decisions, insight into forces behind motivational and demotivational reactions amongst team members, curiosity and ability to accept and handle change, knowledge about and ability to mediate information and communication plus acceptance of hardship and willingness to compete. Similarly Cleland (1995) considers project managers have vision, the ability to influence (through charisma, knowledge, skills, political savvy, networks, interpersonal skill, the ability to communicate, empathy, and coaching techniques), and the ability to inspire others. Verma (1996) states that project managers' skills include being high achievers, able to co-ordinate and integrate across multi-functional lines, familiarity with the operations and strengths of all functional departments, and strong communications and interpersonal skills.

Empirical studies have been carried out for individual companies and organisations (e.g. Baker et al, 1988, Leonard, personal communication, 1996, Strohmeier, 1992). Gadeken and McVeigh (McVeigh, 1995) working with US military project managers and using Boyatzis' methods identified sixteen competencies of which eleven were common to all project managers (political awareness, innovation, sense of ownership/mission, long term perspective, managerial orientation, action oriented, focus on excellence, strategic influence, critical enquiry, systematic thinking and proactive information gathering) and five distinguish the superior performers (coaches others, developing relationships, self control, results orientation and interpersonal assessment).

Real Project Managers in Action

The author has undertaken an empirical, cross company and cross industry study centred on twenty three project managers, nineteen men and four women. Twelve of them worked for financial services companies, six in engineering and five in project management consultancies. All the organisations had an approved project management method and a cadre of trained and experienced project managers. However, only the engineering companies were project organisations: the financial services companies used projects to affect change against the background of continuing operations and the consultants tended to work within similar organisations.

They were highly experienced and educated people, working on a wide range of projects. Twelve of them had more than eight years' project management experience; only three had three years or fewer. Seventeen of them were educated at least to bachelor degree level. Nine project managers had no professional qualifications or memberships. The remaining fourteen held twenty six professional qualifications and memberships between them from seventeen different bodies. Only two project managers were members of the APM, but eleven others had membership of the British Computer Society and engineering institutes. They described a total of 69 projects, most of them unique. Even for those projects with an emphasis on IT or construction the project managers' responsibilities extended into the business and were not exclusively technical.

They were interviewed (using Boyatzis' method (1982)) and asked to describe in as much detail as possible a number of situations s/he had encountered on one or more projects with a bias towards those which s/he felt had gone well but including some situations which had gone badly. For each situation the project manager was prompted to recall what s/he had wanted to achieve, what s/he had said, done, thought and felt and what had happened. Project managers were then asked to describe the characteristics or behaviours they thought were typical of a good project manager, and to illustrate them with examples from their own behaviour. Scores for outcome competence were calculated from a questionnaire which contained a large number of questions drawn from the professional competence standards of the AIPM and a small number of questions about the respondents themselves.

Thirteen of the twenty three project managers were rated superior performers by their organisations and the rest were rated competent. This was not done on any consistent, quantifiable basis, just the opinion of the source. The sources were asked how they would rate the people they had put forward and if they said they were all excellent they were questioned further and asked to rank the people against each other.

Aware that this process was likely to be very subjective the interviewees were also given a questionnaire which asked them about their working practices using the AIPM's competency model. They had to score for each practice whether they followed it always, nearly always, sometimes, occasionally, seldom or never. There was also a column to indicate that a practice was completely irrelevant to the way they managed projects. This questionnaire was intended to measure their working practices again best practice. The 'completely irrelevant' response was provided so that items not required in their organisation's project management methodology would not penalise their overall score. Since they could have answered different numbers of questions the score for all questions was divided by the number of questions answered to give an average score for each PM. (Using the total scores without the 'completely irrelevant' marks was trialed and showed little difference between that and average scoring: all but one changes were within quartile groups.)

There was a full one to one match between the top quartile scorers on the questionnaire and the employers' assessment of superior performers. Of the second quartile, four were also superior performers and two were average. In the third quartile there were three superior performers and there was one superior performer in quartile 4. Thus seventeen had working practices scores which appeared to match their employer rating but six of the interviewees were inconsistent between their working practices score and their employer rating.

There seemed good reason to divide the PMs into three groups: superior and average performers and "mavericks". This yielded nine superior performers and ten average performers. The four mavericks were also rated as superior performers by their employers but did not claim to follow the AIPM standards for project management. They may either be more honest or just less structured in their working practices.

The interview transcripts were coded using Hyperesearch software and used to identify behaviours which were clustered under the headings: politics and communications (11); project management techniques (8); working through colleagues (5); implementing (4); developmental (2); and knowledge of the business (1). In contrast to Gadeken and McVeigh's studies (McVeigh, 1995) none of the 31 behaviours identified was exhibited by all the project managers. However, five behaviours were more commonly exhibited by the superior rated managers: creates project processes; appraises political situation; involves the right people; gains powerful allies; and uses network to gain information. The first of these was classified as a project management technique; the rest were politics and communications behaviours. Four other behaviours were more commonly described by the average performers than the superior performers: managing costs, seeking information for monitoring, influencing without authority and exploring all viewpoints. The remaining ten behaviours were not strongly associated with either superior or average performers but key amongst them was the creation of project structure, which was discussed far more by PMs in functional organisations than those in project organisations.

Seeking to understand in an integrated manner how these project managers were operating, recourse was had to the theory of actors and networks (Callon, 1986). The theory is a form of sociological analysis concerned with the mechanics of power. Callon (1986) illustrates the theory with four "moments of translation" in which a small group of researchers sought to impose their will on other people (Breton fishermen) and the external environment (currents, collection nets, scallops). Similarly PMs seek to control and co-ordinate (APM, 1999, 1.9) the project stakeholders and the project deliverables.

The first moments of translation is *problematisation*: seeking to become indispensable to other actors by defining the desired outcomes of the project and its problems (risks) and then suggesting that these would be resolved if the actors negotiated the obligatory passage point of the project manager's project management plan. To draw people into accepting that the project manager's terminology best describes the actual situation, the PMs interviewed used a combination of involving the right people, appraising the political situation and using planning techniques to make it simple for them. As one of the PMs described it:

"I and the team identified a lot of stakeholders ... I put together the plan based on discussions with them and the plan was basically a spreadsheet showing who were the main people we need to contact as a result of the closures ... we had, I think, something in the order of over 30 different types of audiences including local traders. With the team I discussed what messages we wanted to get across, and then I formulated what we needed to do in terms of road shows, briefings to councils, when letters need to go off to local MPs to decide what needs to happen and I structured it in the form of a project plan, something which people who were working with me on the communications group were not familiar with, because they're used to press office people, they're used to reacting to

things, I was trying to plan things, put it on a bit of paper and make it simple for them to actually say at closure minus two months we need to start putting publicity campaign out so that was all itemised and we discussed what levels of publicity and ... so it was all linked together as a plan and I put together the plan and gave it to the individual members and monitored it so they actually implemented it." (Henry, 108)

The second stage is *interessement*: a series of processes by which the PMs sought to lock the other actors into the roles proposed for them in that programme. To interest other actors is to build devices which can be placed between them and all others who wish to identify their roles and responsibilities differently. PMs act in this way when they draw up and document plans using the intentions of others but fitting the parts together to make one integrated plan. They then use PM techniques to monitor and control progress. Projects are so far reaching and full of uncertainty: simplifying (problematising) the project tasks and structures helps PMs control the project deliverables but also control the other actors. Creating project processes appears to differentiate the excellent from the average PM.

If successful, interessement achieves *enrolment*: a set of strategies in which the PMs sought to define and interrelate the various roles they had allocated to others. To a PM structure in a project has a clear meaning: there should be a sponsor, a steering committee, a project manager and a project team. There may also be other stakeholders with an interest in the outcome of the project. Each actor should know clearly what s/he is responsible for delivering and there should not be any overlap or confusion between them. The structure therefore also includes the tasks which make up the deliverable. These need to be clearly defined (in a terms of reference document if not in other project plans and papers) but there is an emphasis on simplicity. Projects are so far reaching and full of uncertainty: PMs try to simplify (problematise) the project tasks and structures in order to control the inanimate but also to enrol the other actors in their story. The legitimacy to do this is attributed to the sponsor, drawing on the established hierarchy of the organisation and the degree to which this includes recognised project structures. The more widely understood how projects are supposed to work (the project professionalism network) the easier this should be for the PM. However, the PM needs to enrol team members over whom s/he has no positional power. The PM does this interessement by talking to the people involved, one at a time (seduction) before meeting with all together when, miraculously they all know what is expected of them and what they expect of each other.

The final stage is *mobilisation*: a set of methods used by the PMs to ensure that supposed stakeholder groups were properly able to represent the project and would act in accordance with the agreed project plan. The same term is used in the APM BoK (1999, 3.10). Once the PM has the plans and charts in his/her hands s/he has the means to order the struggle to maintain the project as a network but s/he also requires the resources and borrowed influence of the sponsor. Finally Callon (1986) notes that translation is a process, never a completed accomplishment. It requires constant maintenance or it may fail.

Conclusion

Adams and Barnt (1988) state: "Project management was designed to provide sustained, intensified, and integrated management of the complex ventures and to pull together a combination of human and non human resources into a temporary organisation to achieve a specified purpose." They add that a PM "operating in an organic environment may have responsibilities which far outreach his formal authority to marshal and direct the needed resources." It is therefore not surprising that the APM BoK (1999, 1.9) describes integration as the key distinguishing function of the PM which "involves bringing people and things together to perform effectively."

The behaviours of excellent project managers are centred on the acquisition and manipulation of power (Pinto, 1996). The research described here suggests that the most successful do not aim so much to influence without authority by some nebulous charisma but to use project structure and processes to build a temporary network in which they play the central role, the channel for all project processes. They are legitimised in this by reference to wider networks: the sponsor's internal hierarchy and the language and techniques of project management.

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