<u>Don't be Trapped by your Experience!</u>

By Collin Quiring

In the February, 2008, Harvard Business Review, an article titled "The Experience Trap" reviewed research that showed experience is sometimes a trap that ensnares the Project Manager. Decision making, planning, reacting, quality, time and cost are some of the variables that are affected by the experiences of the Project Manager. However, that same experience doesn't always result in a better result since knowledge and skill are based on cognitive models that may not be apropos for complex projects. This results in a pattern that an organization can see over time on the results of their projects.

Management's ability to control resources doesn't matter much without information. Information without context and knowledge doesn't allow for an organization to succeed. Management must be able to enhance organization collaboration and increase quality decisions. An organization must be able to learn in an objective and productive manner. The aptitude of the organization directly affects the aptitude of the Project Manager's that it employs. This is one of the traps that the Project Manager can get caught in – they can be immersed in a cycle where they don't fully realize the wealth of experience that they have and the organization doesn't recognize it either.

The research outlined in "The Experience Trap" shows that Project Managers need the most current information about their projects, but they also need historical information that is specific to their organization and to their own projects. They need to be given objective data about issues that affect their project that they may not see right away. There are many items that this could include but one example is the amount of time that expires between making a decision, instituting the decision and seeing the results come to fruition. Having that information available can allow a Project Manager to understand how much time it really takes for their decisions to be put into effect. Another example of how a Project Manager falls into the trap is to not fully comprehend how one decision affects another.

Four methods to break this pattern and apply a holistic management style

1. Authority and Control – Data Versus Useable Data

One of the best methods to employ a holistic management approach and not become immersed in a reactionary management style is to match accountability and control as much as possible for your Project Managers. Identify the people that have control within your organization. This is not always the Project Manager and it is not always the same people for

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every project. Different projects may affect different departments and areas of a company and so for each project, the individuals that have true control over the resources need to be identified.

Once the individuals who control the resources have been identified, make sure that they are getting the information that they need. This is more than just a weekly status report stating the status of the schedule, costs or other standard metrics. This is about getting the information that they truly need to assess your project in relationship to the resources that they control and how other projects or responsibilities are also drawing on those same resources.

We live in a data rich environment. The people that control the resources most likely have so much data to look at that they don't know what to do with it all, how it all the information correlates and how (or if) it truly affects their resources. Getting data that is in a useable form to the people that control the resources is a huge step in the right direction to being able to holistically manage.

2. Information Sharing – More than just data

While getting the right type of data to the right people for a project is critical, so is the ability to share new information quickly. Projects are dynamic and information about a project can change suddenly – sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Current, accurate information needs to be available to stakeholders of a project – not just the people that control the resources, but all the stakeholders.

The ability and willingness to share information (particularly negative information) needs to be institutionalized and the value of that information respected. If an individual at any level of a project is under the perception that they will be punished for sharing negative information, they will do their best to hide it. While some errors and causes of negative events occur due to ineffective personnel, most of them are due to an external cause or an honest mistake. It can be easily determined if this is anomalous behavior (see "Behavior and Results – Resource Optimization") of an individual.

Sharing information quickly and accurately can only benefit an organization. By having the information in a timely manner, management can make decisions that can save an organization from costly mistakes – in time, money, publicity and employee morale. With the most current and truthful information managers can make decisions and defend those decisions more easily.

3. Behavior and Results – Resource Optimization

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A common occurrence is to evaluate somebody based on their most recent work. While recent work and accomplishments are an important metric, it is not a true evaluation of the work that can be produced by an individual. For example, the person may not have been given control over the areas that they are being held accountable for in the evaluation. Or, there may be outside influencers that were unexpected and fundamentally changed the situation – regardless of who would have been responsible for the project in question.

Metrics and goals need to be put into place that judge an individual's behavior over time – and therefore provide a valuable management tool. How do we know whom to promote? How do we determine which person really has the skills that are needed for a specific role? Do our investments in training make a difference in the results that we are obtaining from individuals? Do certain educational degrees, certifications or types of training make a difference? How do we know?

For example, what if a company has a sales organization and goes through the process of setting sales quotas for the entire sales team. A salesman who hasn't been selling anywhere near their quota for ten months of the year and then sells a one-time large sale may be the salesman of the month in November, but one sale doesn't mean they are a good salesman, or even good for your company. How does this salesman compare to another one within your company that has been selling 25% above quota for the entire year? If we use just the metric of sales quota, they may be even, or the salesman with one sale may even be ahead. What if both of these salesman have been with the company five years and the second salesman is usually barely at quota but this year he is having a banner year and that is why he is 25% over quota? But, how does that equation change if the first salesman is assigned the larger, harder to sell accounts and one sale is all he needs in a year to be successful; and the second salesman is assigned a territory that he largely maintains, rather than has to grow, and this year is over quota because of some customer needs, not his own selling techniques.

Evaluating each salesman over time is much more important in this scenario than evaluating on how they have done this year. The same theory should be used for other employees and in particular, Project Managers. Successfully completing one big project may be a feather in the cap of a Project Manager, but does that mean that they are a good Project Manager, or good for your company? Well, if they have been doing the same thing every year for five years, then the answer is probably that, yes, they are good for your company. If they succeeded this time but have a string of poorly performing projects in the past, then they may have gotten lucky, or they may have learned from some training – but, we should evaluate them based on their results over time, not just over this one most recently completed project.

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With a holistic management approach, we look at individuals over time but we also keep records of education, training and certifications that individuals have obtained. This isn't to single out an individual but rather for us to better analyze what cause-and-effects we may be experiencing. Again, we can't determine this based on one project by one person. We have to look at all of our individuals, with all of their skill sets and analyze those results. Is there significance between having a certain educational degree and project success? Does having a specific certification and success correlate? What about a degree and a certification? We can start to see the trends over time and begin to analyze our investments in training in addition to the type of people that we employ. Combined with the pairing of control and authority, longer term performance evaluations can give a more reasonable appraisal of an individual.

4. Future Improvement

Sharing information, optimizing resources and useable data are all key factors for holistic management and for ongoing success of an organization. However, unless the organization institutionalizes these aspects and makes it part of the culture it will never succeed. Obtaining and maintaining information to make better decisions enables the organization to become stronger in their management of projects, their promotion decisions and their future.

Summary

Holistic management requires a mindset that understands projects have complex and sometimes difficult to find influences. Experience and knowledge are great and make a Project Manager more effective but that same experience can potentially make a Project Manager think that they understand the influences upon their project and they tend to minimize all the variables in their mind. While this helps make sense out of a complex world, it can also mean that projects aren't completed as effectively as they could be.

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