

The Project Manager's Three Critical Factors in Career Development

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Much has been written about how to manage a project. *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*—Fourth Edition (Project Management Institute, 2008), as well as many other texts, provide a wealth of guidance in helping us manage projects. But where do we turn to for guidance in managing our careers as project managers? We are certainly a different breed, compared with most other professions. We move from team to team, navigating our way through our organization swiftly as we travel from project to project. So what do we need to do to make our journey a fruitful one? What do we need to focus on to ensure we manage our own career development as effectively as we manage our projects?

In this article I will present the three critical factors to the project manager's career development, which I believe are the key drivers in our journey towards career success in project management: (1) Belief, (2) Strategic Commitment, and (3) Reputation.

Belief

In order to understand the first key factor, which we will refer to as Belief, we should first consider its building blocks: knowledge, personal organization, and consistent project delivery.

The Building Blocks of Belief

Let's start with **knowledge**. Every organization needs to retain knowledge. Yet knowledge is difficult to acquire, and if key staff leave, the resulting knowledge gaps can

be a costly shock. This might lead us to think that by accumulating knowledge on the products or processes that we are changing, we will become key organizational assets.

“ Where do we turn to for guidance in managing our careers as project managers? ”

But hold on: a project manager's role is to leverage the knowledge skills that already exist in functional areas of the organization, not to replicate that knowledge. We should understand our projects, and deeply so, but we need to resist the temptation to become the sole subject matter expert in the process or product that we are changing. Politicians don't know every last detail about the laws that they pass,

but do they need to? No. They work with people who have the requisite knowledge to help make the right decisions.

Ironically the path to your next great project could be ensuring that, while you understand your stakeholders' environment, you do not become so involved that you are regarded as the post-project knowledge expert. It is all too easy for project managers to build up so much knowledge of a changing environment that they become *de facto* owners of the future state. This almost unconscious transition creates a passage from project manager to line manager and will undoubtedly put your project career on hold. Concentrate instead on training current state staff in future state processes to demonstrate your leadership skills and commitment to developing the organization. Possessing knowledge and knowing how to apply it is therefore definitely a key skill, but it is only a small part of project management career development.

Next let's consider **personal organization**. It's easy to dismiss its importance, and to think that it is simply a personality trait—that some people are organized, some

are not, and that it doesn't really matter either way. This is not true. Without personal organization we struggle to get the right things done at the right time, which is crucial in project delivery. After all, there is an entire Knowledge Area in the *PMBOK® Guide* (PMI, 2008) dedicated to Project Time Management. A tremendous amount of hard work can be degraded by weak personal organization. You want your projects to be noticed, right? Then be organized. Delivering a project late without managing expectations could mean that your efforts might not get recognition and that your standing may suffer. A project delivered on time but missing key components may disappoint your audience and an extension will be needed to complete the work.

What about **project delivery**? We often think that “getting ahead” in our careers is about delivering projects on time, every time, and to a high standard. But although project delivery is obviously important, this degree of success in delivery is more something to be *aspired to* than something that can always be achieved. If consistent delivery were everything, then every change leader would have a glowing résumé, replete with unfailing delivery of high-quality results. But we all know that many project industry leaders cannot boast such an impressive achievement. Consistent high-quality delivery demonstrates our ability, our pride in our work, and our commitment to the project. Still, consistent delivery is only one component of what's required for career success.

Using These Attributes to Create Belief

So, what do I mean when I say that knowledge, personal organization, and consistent delivery are each only one attribute of what is needed for successful project management career development?

Each of these attributes are key components of a characteristic we will call **Belief**.

Belief encompasses both the way in which you perceive yourself and the ways in which others perceive you—and this is in part formed by your knowledge, personal organization, and track record of project delivery. These perceptions include self-confidence, trust, and respect. Self-confidence is essentially “internal Belief”—*i.e., you Believe in yourself*. Trust and respect demonstrate “external Belief”—*i.e., other people believe in you*. Trust and respect are crucial for project managers because people instinctively fear change. If stakeholders trust and respect you, then you will likely be given more challenging projects; sponsors will believe that you can guide people safely through change. As you complete

these challenging projects to a high standard, you will earn further trust and respect, and this in turn allows your self-confidence to grow. External and internal Belief develop interactively in this way.

Want the good news? Enjoying Belief shows that you are good at managing the process of change. When taken with other factors, this Belief factor may be a significant driver towards project career development, especially if the projects assigned to you resemble ones that staff in a peer group senior to yours would normally perform. The bad news, however, is that this characteristic of Belief, on its own, is not enough. So what else do we need?

Strategic Commitment

Every organization has strategic goals. A cellular phone company, for example, may aim to “*increase smartphone market share in Europe from 20% to 30% over the next two years.*” You may be aware of the goals of your organization, and if so, then you are in a fortunate situation. If you are not aware of these goals, then you should find out what they are. (We'll discuss the reasons for this shortly.)

Organizational decision makers are highly concerned about the achievement of strategic goals. This is because these achievements will be highly visible to employees, shareholders and the media. They also want business to carry on as usual in the meantime, ensuring that day-to-day activities and profit generation are maintained. However, business-as-usual activities are unlikely to achieve the “big ticket” goals on their own. These goals are achieved only through change initiatives led by project managers.

By seeking out those projects that lead to the achievement of these goals, you will demonstrate commitment to the wider vision of the organization and attract **Strategic Commitment**. Project managers who attract Strategic Commitment are those whom senior staff want around them and often look to carry with them. They are the individuals who are seen as enabling the product, process, or organizational development that leads to the achievement of strategic goals.

So how do you attract Strategic Commitment?

First, become aware of the strategic goals of your organization. Second, think about what project initiatives will be required to achieve the strategic goals. Perhaps your department head has just announced a series of new strategic initiatives or targets, or you have asked for the first time about the organization's strategic goals. Perhaps the formation of some enabling projects is being considered. Talk to key stakeholders and discuss how you can be involved. They may appreciate your offer because it is often difficult for business-

as-usual managers to conceptualize the steps required for bringing about change. As a project manager, you will likely find that this is one of your areas of expertise and you can be a key asset in defining how the organization can move from its current to future state.

Next, create a plan for the project and demonstrate how it is achievable. I am often amazed at the expressions of relief on the faces of senior staff when they see that a seemingly unachievable goal dictated by those at the top can be accomplished through controlled steps, *a.k.a. disciplined project management*.

Strategic commitment is a critical factor and it is in partnership with Belief. Success in day-to-day activities will attract the success factor of Belief. Then, when you ask to participate in big-picture projects it is more likely that management will include you as a result. These big-picture projects will then, in turn, attract further Strategic Commitment.

Something is still missing, however.

Reputation

Reputation is a combination of image and perception. Sometimes it may not be well earned and it may not be justified. It is an emotional response that is derived as much from your project management skills as it is from nights out on the town with your project stakeholders. Reputation is others' judgment of you.

You can influence this judgment through your project deliveries but you cannot control it completely. That is to say, your possession of Belief and Strategic Commitment will be important in shaping your Reputation, but they are not the only building blocks. Normally you may not care what others think of you, but in project management you should. People can get far on Reputation. Those who have achieved great things even when their peers felt that they were only average project managers probably did so because they were well perceived by key project stakeholders.

How do you build Reputation? Through relationship building, cross-working, and self-promotion.

Relationship building is similar to networking. This is something we can do as much with a desk-sharing colleague every day as with project stakeholders in other teams during

nights out. Get to know your project stakeholders. Tell them what you do and find out what they do. Join them for lunch, coffee, even football games. Meet people at training sessions, chat with them at the photocopier or in the elevator...and stay in touch with them.

“ Cross-working is important because project stakeholders talk to each other more than many people realize. ”

Cross-working is all about looking up the stakeholders in your network and helping each other. An example could be someone phoning from another project team to ask you for help with a project similar to one you managed last year. If you can build that relationship well enough, one day you could earn yourself a role in one of that team's projects. Cross-working is important because project stakeholders talk to each other more

than many people realize. If you have worked well with another department, then others will hopefully hear about your enhanced Reputation.

Self-promotion is the art of selling your project successes. Communicate your achievements to others and make those communications targeted. Self-promotion is a skill, and some project managers are naturally able to sell their achievements without being arrogant. The right people need to know about the great projects you've managed. You want them to see your name as synonymous with successful project deliveries. Tell key stakeholders what you've been busy with when you see them; update your sponsor regularly during a long project in case it gets canned mid-life; be the one who gives the presentation to senior management at the end of a significant delivery phase.

Relationship building, cross-working, and self-promotion will help shape your Reputation. Reputation is a critical factor to successful career development. It forms a tripartite relationship with Belief and Strategic Commitment as the project manager's three critical factors in career development.

The Three Critical Factors: Pulling Them Together

Do we need to possess expert levels of all three critical factors? As we can see in countless change leaders, this is not necessarily the case. What is important is to employ the right amount of each at the right time.

At the start of a project management career, Belief and then Reputation may be most relevant, along with a

small amount of Strategic Commitment. As your change management journey develops, concentrating on Reputation and Strategic Commitment may be more important than maintaining a corresponding level of Belief. The balance of factors you need most may change year to year, month to month, and even day to day.

The most successful project managers are those most alert to changes in their environment and most able to adapt their mix of critical factors accordingly. This ability to recognize changes in one's project environment and rebalance one's critical factors accordingly is possessed by those who have masterful control over their Belief, Strategic Commitment, and Reputation. Of course, those around you might not understand what you're really doing...they'll be too busy wondering how you got lined-up to lead that great new project.

References

Project Management Institute (PMI). (2008). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK® guide) (4th ed.)*. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

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