**How Tolerance of Ambiguity Impacts Project Management: Developing the Ability to Manage Uncertainty**

In today’s fast-paced and often fungible workplace, ambiguity is the new normal. Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA), or the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable, is now therefore recognized as a highly desirable trait for project managers (PMs). When PMs see uncertainty as an opportunity rather than a threat, they are more likely to utilize creativity and make better decisions.

Researchers adopted a tri-dimensional framework of TOA to examine how project managers experience and deal with ambiguities in their projects. Dimensions of the framework include:

- **Comfort with Ambiguity** reflects the degree to which an individual remains calm and composed when confronted with ambiguity and uncertainty. PMs who score high in this area remain composed in volatile situations and do not easily experience stress.

- **Desire for Challenging Work** reflects the extent to which an individual seeks out novelty and opportunities to learning their work. PMs who score high in this area are creative people who tend to experience boredom when required to perform mundane tasks.

- **Managing Uncertainty** reflects the degree to which an individual can successfully navigate uncertainty when it occurs. PMs who score high in this area are good at planning, drawing from their networks, and problem solving.

Through three separate but interrelated studies, this research explores how PMs experience and deal with ambiguous situations in their projects. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data, the studies identify types of ambiguous situations in projects, explore how PMs experience and deal with ambiguous situations, and examine individual, organizational, and situational conditions affecting TOA.

- **Study one** identified several categories of ambiguous situations, and revealed that while PMs are often effective when managing ambiguous situations involving task complexity or ambiguities associated with mistakes and errors, they are less confident when dealing with ambiguities that involve managing people.

- **Study two** revealed that most PMs are comfortable when facing ambiguity but prefer a mixture of complex and simple tasks—dealing with the challenges of ambiguity yields job satisfaction but interspersing simpler tasks helps ward off burn out. Furthermore, PMs who seek out relevant information are more effective in dealing with project ambiguity.

- **Study three** found that when PMs are more accepting of ambiguity in specific situations, they are more likely to experience positive affect, perform their job well, and make positive progress on core projects.
Strategies for developing TOA
Researchers identified three capabilities and three organizational resources that help PMs deal with ambiguous situations:

**CAPABILITIES**

- **Mastering knowledge-seeking capability** involves tapping into a PM’s network and encouraging transparent communications to access relevant knowledge and information at the appropriate time, allowing PMs to better understand and deal with a challenging situation.

- **Mastering emotional capability** through practicing emotional regulation and empathy helps PMs recognize and modify emotions in themselves and others, allowing them to better deal with ambiguities in projects.

- **Mastering the problem-focused coping capability** involves using tools like mind-maps and the Cynefin framework to process, simplify, and visualize complex information.

**ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES**

- **Leadership support** helps PMs build tolerance for ambiguity by instilling psychological safety and confidence.

- **Cultivating a learning culture** provides an environment in which PMs feel safe to share knowledge, take risks, and experiment.

- **Time and space** allow PMs to properly explore ambiguous situations, find out relevant information to reduce ambiguity, and evaluate the most appropriate ways to deal with the ambiguity.

The research achieved these five project objectives:

1. Identify and catalogue types of ambiguous situations in projects.
2. Explore how PMs experience and deal with ambiguous situations.
3. Confirm that accepting ambiguity in projects results in positive outcomes.
4. Determine individual, organizational, and situational conditions affecting TOA.
5. Develop a training program for PMs to enhance their ability to manage ambiguity where appropriate.

**OVERALL TAKEAWAY:** Understanding the role of “soft” competencies such as TOA helps to explain the successes and failures of PMs. While PMs may innately possess higher levels of TOA, workplaces and individuals can make choices to boost and cultivate this quality. PMI’s training manual offers recommendations to guide organizational leaders on how to provide support and psychological safety to PMs. The manual also offers advice on adjusting organizational culture to support learning and aid PMs in building greater TOA.

To read the full report, visit pmi.org/learning/academic-research.

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