

“Soft” Skills for Tough Projects
Developing Leaders with the Right Skills to Lead Programs and Projects
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Abstract

As project management has evolved over the last 50 years, there has been a marked tendency to focus on the technical processes and related competencies. While such developments have all been desirable, they were “necessary but not sufficient” and there has been a matching lack of focus upon the human side, the so-called “tough skills”: it is now time to redress the balance, using more than “touchy-feely” ideas and pop-psychology.

Regardless of whether process maturity is strong or weak, the level of leadership and other soft skills possessed by the project manager, program manager, or sponsor will always have a critical impact when it comes to successful delivery. This has implications not only for practitioners who find themselves having to manage projects and programs with a significant “change” element, or high-dynamic complexity, but also for the development of sufficient practitioners with the right level of skill in an organization’s project management community.

Recognition of this is currently reflected within the most mature organizations during the selection of more senior project managers, program managers, and sponsors, which does not depend upon the demonstration of technical skills or qualifications, but is based almost exclusively upon their ability to display and exercise strong soft skills. There are a number of practical steps that can be taken by any practitioner or organization to “raise their game” in this critical aspect of project management competence.

Introduction: Building Project Management on Solid Foundations

In a presentation to the PMI Global Congress—North America in Atlanta, Georgia, the authors of this paper reviewed the developments that had been shown to take place in the management of projects and programs during the past 15 years (Teague & Cooke-Davies, 2007). On the basis of benchmark data obtained from leading global and large national organizations over a 15 year period, we concluded that there were two solid foundations on which the practice of project management was based, and which remained every bit as important today as they were 15 years ago:

- Projects are delivered by people, not by processes, tools, or systems; and
- Good planning lies at the heart of project management.

Projects Are Delivered by People, Not by Processes, Tools, or Systems

Projects are delivered by groups of people working together, and not by processes, by project management tools, or by clever project management systems. And in many of the ways that matter as far as the management of projects is concerned, people and their behavior haven’t changed much over time. For all changes to our technological world, people still behave towards each other much as they have done since (at least) the dawn of recorded history. People are still moved to both helpful and unhelpful behaviors by their emotions (that is, after all, what the word e-motion implies—an impulse that leads to action), and projects, dealing as they do both with change and with temporary organizations, give rise to many such emotions.

In traditional project-based industries, it has long been recognized that only certain people have the necessary aptitude to become good project managers and project directors, and organizations whose business is projects have developed long and careful “apprenticeships” and staged growth for those people who show both the desire and the aptitude for this kind of work. Today, as was true 15 years ago, such people who have reached the top of the tree in terms of being entrusted with the leadership of “mega projects” will tell you that the primary job of the senior project manager is to manage the conflicting interests and agendas of key stakeholders, both outside and inside the boundaries of the project.

Good Planning Lies at the Heart of Managing Projects

In the literature on project management, more has been written about project planning than about any other single topic. Since the techniques of Henry Gantt gained widespread currency in the early years of the twentieth century, planning has been at the heart of the discipline of project management. Major military initiatives during the Second World War, followed by the introduction of critical path methods such as Programme Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) during the 1950s added momentum to this trend (Morris, 1994), so that today, even in the face of much that has changed, planning is seen as the most significant component of project management. For example:

- 20 out of the 42 processes that comprise *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (the PMBOK® Guide)*—Fourth Edition (Project Management Institute [PMI], 2008a), belong to the Planning group of processes, with the remaining 22 being shared among the remaining four groups (2 each to Initiating and Closing, 8 to Executing, and 10 to Monitoring and Controlling).
- Product-based planning lies at the heart of the PRINCE2 methodology.
- 166 of the 488 “best practices” described in PMI’s *Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (OPM3®)*—Second Edition (PMI, 2008b) are concerned with plans or planning.
- In PMI’s 2002 Technical Needs Assessment, which was answered by 334 project management professionals, project planning was identified as the process group that should receive the highest priority from PMI in terms of research and development.

It is natural that this should be the case when you reflect on the essential nature of projects. Projects need distinctive management practices because they are essentially different from repetitive work that is operational or transactional by nature. For this second kind of work (let us call it “business as usual” for convenience), planning is essentially a process of examining past and present performance and designing ways of doing it better, faster, or cheaper in future. To put it another way, in the world of “business as usual,” planning for tomorrow is largely based on yesterday.

It is very different with projects, however, since to a greater or lesser extent, each project is seeking to create beneficial change through some product or service that at the outset exists only in the imagination of its designer. In other words, in the world of projects, planning for tomorrow is all about trying to envision what is involved in creating something that didn’t exist yesterday. That is why project plans need to contain skilfully prepared estimates of resources, costs and durations, as well as both contingency and containment actions to respond to risk events that may or may not happen. The more ambitious or unclear a project’s goals are, of course, the greater are the planning skills required—just as is the case when stakeholder interests are more diverse, or when cultural backgrounds of the project team are more varied.

Process Standardization is Necessary but Not Sufficient To Build Expertise in an Organization

Each of these twin foundations places an emphasis on people, just as much as on process. Project management professional associations and standards bodies, however, have chosen to develop an approach to the practice of project management that focuses attention on process standards and on “bodies of knowledge,” while leaving the development of people skills to the broader field of “general management.”

This has served the profession well, in enabling it to provide a large number of people entering the profession with a basic understanding of what is involved in managing projects. Unfortunately, there is little or no indication that project results are improving as a result (O’Connor & Reinsborough, 1992; Cooke-Davies, 2001). Lest we derive any comfort from the growth of our profession, it is a sobering observation that the performance of large public-sector infrastructure projects, for example, has not improved for a century! (Flyvbjerg, Brunelius, & Rothengatter, 2003)

And if the project management profession is to fulfill its obligations to society, then this has to change. Arguably, the primary importance of people working and planning together is unlikely ever to change, and forms much of the basis to our shared craft. But surely both the actual track record of project delivery, and the public perception that too many projects fail are aspects that should drive our professional agenda during the next decade. Indeed, the

remainder of this paper can be seen as a plea for a change of emphasis that might help to reverse this unhappy and persistent situation.

We Know That People Matter—So What’s New?

Let us be controversial for a moment. Project and program managers do not themselves deliver their projects or programs. There is a sense in which they are a pure overhead cost. What they *do*, is manage the process, and the people who actually do the work to deliver the projects and programs. This work embraces both planning work and implementation work, as is well recognized in BoKs, but it is not the project manager who does the work—he or she manages the people who do.

Project Management, Like All Forms of Management, is About Managing People

In this respect, at least, project management is a subset of management, which is widely researched, although project management is only sketchily recognized as legitimate by the custodians of the academic field of management. At the PMI Symposium in Nashville in 2001, David Cleland gave voice to a real concern with regard to this issue after one of us had given a presentation on the research background to OPM3. He asked, “Can we ever get a clear understanding of project management, if even the parent discipline of management, so much older and more mature, is still so poorly understood?” Interestingly, the point that we are making in this paper reflects a similar question raised in the field of general management studies by the eminent Harvard psychologist, Howard Gardner, who has suggested that perhaps “the proper study of management is man” (Gardner, 2004).

At his keynote address to the PMI Research Conference in Montreal, Bent Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg 2006) drew attention to the Nobel Prize-winning work of Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky and their contribution to the discipline of behavioral economics known as Prospect Theory (Kahnemann & Tversky, 1979). Flyvbjerg cited “optimism bias” as one of the major sources of risk in projects, and its enduring nature as a feature of what it means to be human. As a consequence, he advocated a number of additional processes to improve the management of risk, including various forms of the “outside look” and “reference class forecasting.”

But why stop there? Behavioral economics is not the only branch of psychology that is exploring what it means to be human in the light of modern research. Others include cognitive neuroscience (e.g., Pinker 1997), evolutionary psychology (e.g., Dunbar 2004; Livingstone Smith, 2007) and sociobiology (e.g., Lumsden & Wilson, 2005).

Optimism bias is simply one of the biases now recognized in these various disciplines. Others include:

- **Self-serving bias:** The tendency to take the credit for success, and blame external factors for failure
- **Self-centered bias:** The tendency for an individual contributor to take a disproportionate amount of credit for the outcome of group effort
- **Egocentricity bias:** The tendency to exaggerate the importance of one’s role in past events
- **False consensus effect:** The tendency to believe that most people share one’s opinions and values
- **Assumption of uniqueness:** The tendency to overestimate one’s uniqueness
- **Illusion of control:** The tendency to exaggerate the degree of one’s control over external events
- **Hindsight bias:** The tendency to retrospectively overestimate the probability of past events occurring
- **Self-righteous bias:** The tendency to regard oneself as having higher moral standards or greater moral consistency than others have
- **In-group/out-group bias:** The tendency to view members of the group to which one belongs in a more positive light than members of groups of which one is not a member
- **Base-rate fallacy:** The tendency to neglect population characteristics and prior probabilities when making probabilistic inferences
- **Conjunction fallacy:** The tendency to regard the conjunction of two events as more probable than either of them occurring singly (Livingstone Smith, 2004)

How these different biases influence the behavior of people when they find themselves working in the world of projects rather than in that of “business as usual” is a topic that merits more detailed and scientific study.

Project Management Research Has Tended to Take a “Competency” Point of View

Within project management, both research into “the people side,” and practitioner literature about the development of skills, have tended to be somewhat limited and focused into specific areas, usually related to competencies. That is understandable in view of the enormous influence of the *PMBOK® Guide* (PMI, 2008a), with its recognition that people need general management skills to supplement project management knowledge; it is also in line with the generic focus on process and related technical competence, rather than on softer, people-related skills.

What that ignores, however, is the question of how people’s behavior in a project environment, especially a particularly complex environment, differs from their behavior in other, perhaps better understood environments. It also appears to be at odds with the way in which more mature organizations actually select project managers for their most senior roles, where the focus falls entirely upon “tough,” behavioral skills, while technical competence is generally assumed.

Projects in Their Organizational Context

Every organization exists for a particular purpose, and it seeks to accomplish this through adopting some form of strategy: either explicitly or implicitly, and either inside or outside the awareness of its people. As Michael Porter explains, “Every firm competing in every industry has a competitive strategy, whether explicit or implicit” (Porter, 1985 p xiii).

Two Classes of Activity—The Accepted View

Strategies are achieved, however, by accomplishing work—and it is accepted wisdom within the project management world that two different categories of work are required.

The first is the day-to-day operation of the particular activity by which the organization accomplishes its purposes. For example:

- Pharmaceutical organizations manufacture and distribute licensed medicines and devices to hospitals, clinics and patients
- Transport companies move people and freight from place to place by road, air, rail or sea
- Telecommunications companies manufacture and sell telephones and communication equipment, and operate and maintain networks by which subscribers can communicate with each other
- Government agencies collect taxes, pay benefits, issue licenses, provide healthcare, educate children and adults, police society and so on
- Charitable organizations provide aid to disaster-hit communities, support the victims of particular diseases and other misfortune, raise funds, and keep account of them, and so on
- Clubs and voluntary organizations support all aspects of membership and support the specific activities they exist to support, and so on

These kinds of activities are generally referred to as “operations,” or, perhaps more graphically, as “business as usual.” The theory and practice of managing these activities has been the main focus of the discipline of “management”—not only the overall practice of “general management,” but the specific subdisciplines such as operations management, marketing management, finance management, human resource management, and so on.

The second kind of work consists of all those initiatives and activities that are undertaken to improve an organization’s ability to accomplish its purpose—not simply by doing them better, but by doing them differently. If it is to survive and flourish in the continually changing world in which we live, then each organization needs to undertake efforts that are designed to:

- Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its “business as usual” activities
- Renew itself and create additional opportunities through developing new businesses, new products, new services, or new markets

- Identify opportunities to transform “business as usual” activities through introducing new technology, new processes, or new ways of working
- Build new physical infrastructure, acquire new assets, and so on

This second kind of work is what is generally referred to as projects, programs, and project portfolios. The theory and practice that has developed for these efforts has been the main focus of, initially, project management, but, more recently, program management and project portfolio management, also.

Most text books and standards in the world of project management explain that the way the two classes of work differ is that projects are temporary and are concerned with the creation of a more-or-less unique product or service—and in response to this temporariness and uniqueness, a set of tools and techniques has developed to help plan and manage them better.

The difficulty with this explanation is that it approaches the topic from an analysis of the work to be done, rather than of the people who have to work together to undertake the project—the focus is on the “management of the work of the project” rather than on the specific challenges involved in the “management of *the people* who do the work of the project.”

Additionally, there is the question of the impact of the work being undertaken on the wider community within an organization or elsewhere; where “business as usual” is concerned, there is typically little or no impact, and an atmosphere of stability or even comfort prevails. Conversely, since projects are intrinsically about change, the impact here is emotional and tends to be typified by resistance. Here again, the focus for project management is on dealing with the emotions and overcoming the resistance to change—once more, calling for a higher level of “tough skills” than is required in a “business as usual” situation.

Two Classes of Activity—An Augmented View

Both of these kinds of work need to be planned as well as executed, so it is easy to believe that planning is an activity common to both. This is, however, a mistake. What is involved in “planning” business as usual activities is a very different cognitive exercise than what is involved in “planning” projects and programmes.

Business as usual is what the organization already knows and experiences, and thus forms a predictable basis from which to plan variations that can, generally, be relied upon to deliver the required improvement. This can conveniently be labelled “adaption.” Risks have to be considered, of course, but they can be thought of as unusual events that do not occur in the normal course of events.

Projects and programs, on the other hand, involve planning and then creating some product or service that at the point of inception exists only in the imagination of the person or people who are promoting it. The process of planning these activities, therefore, involves imagining a series of steps that may or may not work out as planned, and each of which may have unforeseen consequences. It could be described as a process of “enfolding an envisaged future into a known present,” and can conveniently be labelled as “innovation.”

The differences implicit in the temporary nature of projects are also frequently underestimated. For all but the most short-lived or routine of adaptations, it is normal practice for an organization to create a “project team” or “program organization,” provided that the innovation is sufficiently important that it requires its own dedicated resources and structure for management, either as a project or a program. Such a team, existing as it does solely for the purpose of accomplishing the particular activity, is by its nature temporary, and therefore likely to be less stable, regardless of whether the people who make up the team are in fact employees of the permanent organization, employees of a supplier organization, or self-employed contractors hired specifically for the duration of the project or program (Turner & Müller, 2002). Business-as-usual activities, on the other hand, are by their very nature at the heart of the permanent organization that is seeking to accomplish its specific purpose through the strategy that it has adopted.

This much is well understood. What is much less well appreciated is the fundamental difference between the purpose of the permanent organization, which, in common with all animate organisms, is for the most part to survive

and prosper in whatever circumstances it finds itself, and that of the temporary project or program team, which is simply to deliver the particular product or service required and then to move on.

As Exhibit 1 illustrates, these two differences amount to completely different worlds, with differing worldviews, and that has two implications for projects and the communities of people who are seeking ways of managing them better.

	Projects & Programs	Business as Usual
Organization	<p>Temporary: Purpose = Delivery</p>	<p>Permanent: Purpose = Survival</p>
Challenge	<p>Innovation: Realizing Envisioned Future State.</p>	<p>Adaptation: Improving Known Current State.</p>

Exhibit 1: Two very different worlds.

Getting Serious About Managing the People Who Work on Projects

Fundamental Differences

This richer understanding of the differences between projects and programs on the one hand, and business as usual on the other, leads to two fundamental differences between these different kinds of work.

First, there are important structural and organizational differences between the two. It has already been argued elsewhere that the respective worldviews are so different, that communication between the two groups becomes problematic (Dinsmore & Cooke-Davies, 2005). One could legitimately speculate that interactions between the people immersed in these two groups might also be potentially fraught with difficulty and with plenty of room for misunderstanding. It has also been shown that the systems and structures necessary and sufficient both to manage and to govern temporary organizations differ from those for permanent organizations (Turner & Keegan, 1999).

Second, however, in the interests of “the proper study of management being man,” it is appropriate to consider how human beings function when faced with the work of delivering innovation as opposed to when they are faced with the task of adapting business as usual. Extensive research by Michael Kirton over a period of more than 30 years has drawn attention to the different psychological profiles of people who are more attuned to solving problems using adaptation than using innovation, and vice versa. (e.g., Kirton, 2003) There is even a psychometric instrument (the Kirton Adaption/Innovation Indicator, or KAI) that can be used to demonstrate the extent of preference for one or the other in any individual, and that has been shown to correlate well with results obtained using other psychometric instruments such as the MBTI (Higgins & Cougar, 1995).

If this is true, then it is likely that groups of people in temporary organizations charged with the task of innovation are likely both to make decisions and to share practices that differ considerably from those charged with the task of adaptation in permanent organizations. At least one piece of research indicates that this is, indeed, the case.

Complexity in Human Communication

In a report shortly to be published by PMI (Cicmil, Cooke-Davies, Crawford, & Richardson, in press), an investigation of complexity in projects, its impact on the behavior of the people involved, and in particular on the complex processes of relating that were involved, the authors conclude that:

- Projects involve a particular kind of patterned conversational and power relating between people, and the role of such tools as work breakdown structures, activity networks, and project schedules is help form these conversations and relationships.
- Project work can be viewed as a form of the self-organizing capacity that emerges from these complex processes of communicating and relating, and the way that people make sense, moment by moment through self-reflection, on conflict and power in the local context.
- Power is therefore located in the processes of conversing and relating, rather than in any one individual.
- People experience feelings aroused by these processes of relating, emergence, and self-organizing, and how they deal with these feelings when outcomes are not predictable will vary from person to person and culture to culture. Complexity, therefore, is unavoidable.
- This diversity of culture and people, each of whom has an imperfect memory of past events and the capability to act spontaneously, creates the possibility of transformation and novelty on projects and programs.
- Perhaps the most telling observation is that, contrary to the paradigm implicit in so much taken-for-granted project management practice, “[a project] manager cannot stand outside organizational processes and control them, direct them, or even perturb them in an intentional direction. All such intentions are gestures made to others in an organization, and what happens unfolds from the ongoing responses.”

In other words, delivering a complex project is not so much a matter of knowing what to do and designing a system and processes to do it, as it is a matter of skillfully navigating the tides, storms, and cross-currents of human beings, with all their desires, motivations, quirks, and behaviors, while constructively engaging with them to achieve desirable outcomes.

Implications for Project Management Practice

All of this supports the case for putting people at the center of project management. But just what does that mean for practitioners? How can the appropriate level of leadership skills be developed? That is what we will now consider from two different points of view: first, developing the skills of individual project managers; and second, developing the skills of the whole community involved in managing projects in any organization.

Implications for Practitioners

In recognition of just how difficult it is to develop the kind of skills required to manage people in a demanding and complex project or program environment, the Association for Project Management’s “People SIG” has started to talk about these kinds of skills not as “soft” skills, but rather as “tough” skills, both to distinguish them from the “hard” skills (as technical competencies are frequently referred to), and also to do justice to just how difficult they are to develop and to practice.

One organization that has pursued this point very actively is the Research and Development department of GlaxoSmithKline. Under the leadership of Jacqui Alexander, as a part of a company-wide program to improve project and portfolio planning known as iPlan, GSK has developed and implemented what they call “The Tough Skills Mastery Programme” (Alexander, 2009). Launched in January 2008 with the full support of the Global Leadership Team, the programme was designed against three underlying principles:

- **Focus on high-performance behaviors:** The cornerstones of the programme were set on 4 of the 12 GSK High-Performance Behaviors, which were selected by the Global Project Management LT as particularly essential for project managers to master. These were “building confidence,” “teamwork,” “enabling and driving change,” and “creating business solutions.”
- **Driving behavior change through sustained learning:** Our people skills are formed as behaviors or habits, and in order to change habits, one has to practice the change many times before it is embedded into the subconscious. Additionally, Jacqui’s experience of delivering programs over the last 20 years had been that one-off training courses do not deliver sustainable results. Based on these insights, Jacqui and the

leadership team knew that it was important to deliver the program through a series of workshops over a number of months.

- **One size does not fit all:** It was clear that each project manager attending the program would have different development needs, and it was imperative to have one-to-one coaching in order to cater to those individual needs. As a professionally certified coach, Jacqui had been providing one-to-one coaching in R&D for a number of years, and so was very aware of the benefit it would deliver as a complement to the workshops.

Jacqui says, “We created a programme of development spanning 4 months, comprising a series of workshops for group experience, complemented by one-to-one coaching to achieve personal outcomes. Our intent was to reverse the trend of over-training and under-implementing.” (Alexander, 2009)

Implications for Organizations

But how do programs such as GSKs fit into the development of strategic project management capability across a whole organization? That was the question that brought together 40 senior practitioners from 26 organizations to spend 2 days at a workshop in September 2008 at Shell’s facilities in Rijswijk, to consider what good practice looks like in the development of “project academies.” At the workshop, which was organized and facilitated by Human Systems and sponsored by Shell’s Project Academy, organizations such as Shell, NASA, Rolls Royce, General Electric, Motorola, GSK, and the UK Government’s Office of Government Commerce (OGC) heard case studies illustrating a diversity of good practices, and formed a group to benchmark each other for this crucial strategic activity. A working party of members of the group is currently working with Human Systems to develop the benchmarking instrument, and the first benchmarking exercise will be conducted during the third quarter of 2009.

What is already clear is that the development of a skilled community to manage an organization’s strategic portfolio of projects and programs requires much more than a collection of training programs, and a career ladder. First, the scope and purpose of the effort needs to reflect the organization’s dependence on projects and programs, and to be directly related to its strategic goals and corporate objectives. Once this has been identified, however, there are many other factors to consider, including:

- How the project management community is developed, managed, and governed
- How formal development programs (such as GSK’s “tough skills” programme) are provided
- What project-related roles are served by the academy
- How development is delivered, for example, by what combination of training, education, self-directed learning, and coaching
- How the academy makes use of the best available knowledge, both internal and external to the organization

All of these, and other issues, are clear signs that our profession is maturing and recognizing the vital importance of developing communities with the right skills to lead, plan, and manage projects and programs. There is still, however, a long way to go, as this paper seeks to point out.

Conclusion—Putting People at the Center of Project Management

Experienced managers of projects with a high degree of complexity have always known that it is mastery of talents such as political awareness, emotional intelligence, or aligning people behind a common goal that makes the difference between projects; success and failure. Organizations that undertake such projects and programmes also appreciate the importance of appointing the right leader to each critical programme.

This paper has sought to make the case for systematically and professionally paying the same degree of attention to the development of “tough” skills throughout the community of people who lead, plan, and manage projects and programs. And not simply through folk wisdom and anecdotal evidence, but through prolonged and rigorous study by researchers and professional associations on the one hand, and on the other, by consistent, focused and strategic attention from the senior management of organizations whose existence depends upon the effective and efficient delivery of projects and programs.

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