

beyond... the mbh newsletter



Jan 2003

Editors Comment

Happy new year. I hope you all had a safe and restful festive season and are ready to complete all projects on time, under budget and to the quality that ensures endless benefits to your business and career.

This edition sees the release of our preliminary findings into the leadership qualities of project managers. Those who read our September newsletter will remember we foreshadowed this study during our article on the wimpy project manager. Our preliminary findings have proven inconclusive and we are now broadening the scope to include a full survey of MBH's 500 strong contacts database. The results of the survey will be released in our March newsletter. This preliminary release includes findings from discussions we have had with the top executives of MBH's key clients / partners. Over 80% said that they didn't feel their project managers were strong enough leaders, but also commented that they didn't see leadership as a key role of the project manager. They believe the sponsor (i.e. themselves) as the leader and that the sponsor needs to be the person who ensures buy in and inspires people to the project's goals.

The wimpy project manager - a case study

Back in September of last year, this newsletter featured an article on the wimpy project manager. The assertion that project managers are wimpy came from an article in the PMI's June 2002 edition of PM Network magazine. This article, written by Neil Whitten, raised the following issues about project managers (as a generalisation):

- Don't expect management to understand project management
- It is the exception rather than the rule that a sponsor or senior manager will undermine a project
- Most senior managers are looking to grow and want their business to be a success
- Everyone is looking for the project manager to take charge
- Project managers get a weak backbone when they give up
- Project managers are leaders and leaders are teachers

MBH decided to research the standing project managers have with senior management. The goal of the study was to come to a conclusion on whether project managers are wimpy and fail to lead when managing projects. The study began by us clarifying what we see as leadership and what qualities we would expect a project manager to have that would demonstrate leadership. To do this we went to our Fundamentals of Managing by Project course. In this course, we look at what is required to be a good leader. Through the development of this course, MBH developed the 7 C's of leadership; they are:

- Courage
- Commitment
- Compassion
- Curiosity
- Communication
- Creativity
- Consistency

The 7 C's of leadership serve to remind you of the complex nature of leadership and why we hold so much admiration for our great leaders: it is a great skill that requires much learning, thought and practice.

Using the 7 C's as a framework we met with senior executives from our clients / partners. These meetings were of an informal nature but generally covered questions around the 7 C's. Did project managers in their organisation have courage of their convictions? Did they show commitment, compassion and curiosity? How well did they communicate and did it vary depending on the stakeholder? How creative were they in solving problems and dealing with issues / risk? Were they consistent in the method used to manage their projects? Grouping the 7 C's into the 5 questions above, below is a summary of the results:

Courage of their convictions

Generally, project managers would use steering committees and project sponsors to decide on change (This is consistent with Whitten's article). They rarely put forward solutions but were very good at outlining the problem. Having said this, senior management didn't believe the project manager's role included resolving issues and problem solving. This is consistent with the statements made by Neil that a project manager should not expect management to understand their role and that they should take charge. It does contradict his statement, however, that management desires the project manager to take charge. MBH's belief for the variation is that it is cultural. Neil's experiences are based on American businesses that have had 10 years of change towards cross functional teams within companies. These cross functional teams are managed by project managers. Senior managers are focused on strategy and value chain management. In Australia, companies are still very functional. Silos exist and project management is more an accidental practice filled by subject matter experts. Senior Management manage departments and spend significant proportions of their time management people rather than on strategic and value chain management.

Commitment, Compassion and Curiosity

On the commitment front, the Australian project manager scores well. Most senior managers see people running projects as keen and committed to making a difference in their organisation. What was noted, however, was that project team members were not as committed and therefore, the project manager fails to lead the project team to the project goal. We believe that this is due to the team members not being dedicated to the project. A subject matter expert will always complete their business as usual work before completing project work as this is generally what they are assessed on at performance appraisal time. This means that project managers are set up to fail and their chances of obtaining a committed team is significantly reduced.

Compassion is all about understanding the environment that a person is working in. Curiosity is about daring to challenge. Realising that what is seen and heard is not all that is thought is essential for people to implement these two "C's". A project manager's project often creates significant change in an organisation. Feedback from senior management was that it was rare for a project manager to understand the resistance to change. This lack of understanding led to a project manager adjusting the project to accommodate the resistance rather than dealing with this resistance. They didn't show compassion or dare to challenge because they didn't confront the resistance and bent to whichever area of the business shouted the most. With this lack of conviction, we are left with uncertainty as to whether a project manager dealing with this resistance would do so in a compassionate manner and would show humility and understanding.

Communication

On this "C", the project manager seems to get a big tick. Most senior managers felt that project managers communicated effectively to them as sponsors. However, it must be understood that this channel of communication, while very important, is probably the easiest to implement. Where project managers still need to be tested is their communication with their team members, other key stakeholders and the general community that they are working in. With most knowledge workers bombarded with emails and with non-knowledge workers lack of time for emails, getting a message out into the business is becoming harder and harder. Added to this is the reducing budgets for communications. It is rare for a project budget to

include the costs of a roadshow or help desk and printing of posters and project stationery almost is obsolete. Once again, it comes back to the project manager to challenge senior management and convince them that the need for communication out to the business is crucial.

Creativity

The answer here is linked back to courage of convictions. The culture of most organisations interviewed was for the sponsor or steering committee to resolve problems, not the project manager. Issues were raised and monitored by the project manager but were not resolved by them or their teams. This often leads to poor outcomes as the problem solving is not robust enough. Project sponsors will not be close enough to a project to know which is the best solution and by resolving issues without the right amount of information leads to poor decision making. Some of this is mitigated by the project managers success in communicating with their sponsors. Is it really the role of the sponsor to be so involved in a project that they end up making all the decisions?

Consistency

Here is another of the 7 C's that project managers are set up to fail. By not providing a standard methodology framework and by creating accidental project managers, project teams are rarely managed in the same way. This inconsistency is not limited to between projects within the one organisation. It is even apparent during the various phases of a project's life! Although unsure as to the level of inconsistency, senior management felt that their interaction on the project changed during the projects life. This consistency of method is essential if the project manager is going to be able to create the environment that enhances problem solving, increases participation and ensures that all participants know what is expected of them.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above study, Neil Whitten's comments tend to have some accuracy in Australia. The study also shows that much more effort needs to go into the environment that a project manager is working in to allow them to lead. Leadership within a company needs to be at various levels if that company is going to succeed. Senior management must give the strategic direction and track progress in achieving the vision. This direction and tracking will provide the framework for project managers to lead project teams towards the completion of their project and the achievement of the project goals. Without an understanding of what the organisation is and where it is going, without consistency of method, diverse and effective communications, creativity problem solving and courage to carry things through, a company is doomed to be caught in a treadmill. Leadership is the term that is used to encompass these qualities. It is a difficult quality to have and needs to be recognised as such by senior management. It also needs to be recognised by them as a quality required in their project managers. Having said this, project managers must take the lead in convincing senior managers of their leadership capabilities. They can start doing this by making some decisions, by having courage in their convictions and commitment to the people on their teams.

MBH will now look to further enhance this study. We will be issuing a survey over the coming weeks on how well you perceive project managers as leaders in your organisation. Do you think it is something they need to implement projects, or is being a good manager enough? Participation in this study will allow us to validate some of the assertions made both in the PM world generally and by MBH specifically. We look forward to your responses.