

Developing Project Management Competence: Are We Really Competent?
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Abstract

The Project Management Office (PMO) has become a common answer to the quest for project excellence. This quest is often translated into the establishment of best practices, the implementation of methods and tools, the promotion of knowledge sharing opportunities and the development of a training curriculum.

The paper, which reports on a major effort undertaken to redesign the competence development process, argues that fostering project management role awareness shall be given the highest priority in PMO's agenda.

A passion for innovation excellence

Tetra Pak Carton Ambient (TPCA) – the largest business areas within Tetra Pak Group – designs, develops and manufactures food packaging and distribution systems. The Company employs about 80 project managers and runs over 100 projects simultaneously.

TPCA had a formal and structured innovation process in place, including activity workflows, project life-cycle phases, decision making process, roles and responsibilities, tools and templates, as well as metrics to monitor process compliance and performance.

Thanks to some of these metrics, the Company, along the years, became aware of its innovation strengths and improvement areas. Project management was recognised as an area to be deeper investigated and focussed on.

The top management decided to formally assign an ownership for project management competence development, practices, methods and tools. The PMO was established in July 2004.

Since the Company only employed skilled, and often certified, project manager professionals, the first logical step to take was to analyse the potential link between project management and innovation performance. The following two questions arose:

- Do skilled project managers always translate into effective project management?
- What is project management competence?

We needed to know more about what traditional and non-traditional literature reported on this.

The quest for competence

Traditionally, competence is described as the possession of a specific set of attributes (i.e. knowledge, skills, abilities, personal traits, work procedures). Different approaches, all sharing the same *attributive* perspective, are used in human resource selection and professional development; a worthy example is provided by the Project Manager Competency Development Framework (Project Management Institute, 2002).

On the other hand, human resource professionals are very well aware of the downside of every attributive approach: the risk of hiring a knowledgeable, well trained, gifted person who, when assigned to the job, will demonstrate a relatively poor performance level.

An alternative point of view is proposed by the *interpretive* approach to competence at work, which argues that competence consists in nothing more than the conceptual representation of the work (i.e. the interiorised role).

In this approach, it is not the possession of a specific set of attributes that determines competence but, instead, "it is the workers' ways of conceiving work that make up, form, and organize their knowledge and skills into distinctive competence in performing their work" (Sandberg, 2000).

The awareness of the role to be performed is key to determine the individual's performance; it stimulates the search for additional knowledge and the opportunities to put in practice the natural abilities and personal traits. Indeed, it is in order to reach this awareness that a good actor learns to think and to live like the character he has to play, until the life of the latter overlaps to the actor's personal life.

The interpretive approach postulates that, within an organisation, there are only a limited number of conceptual models of the role (between two and six) which are hierarchically organized, where the understanding of the top levels include the representations of the lower levels.

Even if all the individuals can understand the different roles, each of them is, in fact, able to behave only in accordance with the corresponding interiorised model. Moreover, managers behaving accordingly to a lower level role will describe higher level conceptual models by using the frame of reference typical of their interiorised role.

Translating theory into results

In order to test the suitability of the interpretive perspective to the project management context, we developed a one day role awareness workshop, whose objectives were:

- introducing this approach to the project management community;
- identifying which conceptions of the role are present in the participant's group;
- outlining the hierarchy of the identified roles.

The pilot workshop involved a group of ten individuals representing the three existing project management position levels. Starting with the question 'What does project management work mean for you?', we employed group dynamics techniques to identify clusters of activities which described different concepts of the project manager role.

The group defined five layers, hereby reported according to the increasing level of role awareness.

1. *Execution and problem solving.* Efficiently solve problems when they occur.
2. *Planning and management.* Organize activities and human resources to prevent problems and consequently be able to execute efficiently.
3. *Political sensitivity.* Appreciate stakeholders' expectations in order to plan correctly and to execute efficiently.
4. *Leadership.* Lead team and stakeholders in order to meet their expectations, in order to plan correctly and to execute efficiently.
5. *Strategic awareness.* Set project vision, align project objectives to strategies, lead team and stakeholders to meet their expectations, in order to plan correctly and to execute efficiently.

In order to analyse the rhetoric used to describe the different conceptual models, participants were also engaged in a presentation of the characteristics of good and bad project managers. The comparative analysis of the different descriptions of the roles was used as a basis for establishing the hierarchy of role levels (Partington, 2005).

Through the expression and style chosen for explaining the characteristics of the extreme examples of project managers, the participants unwittingly expressed their way of understanding the role. Their level of awareness became surprisingly clear to both facilitators and contributors.

Are we really competent?

The result of the pilot role awareness session was encouraging; focussing on role awareness, as a complement to the more traditional skills, behaviours and attitudes assessment and development, was applicable to the project management community. Consequently, we started a project for redesigning the project management competence development process, in order to integrate role awareness elements in all of its steps.

The redesign project team, driven by the PMO, involved an HR representative, two project managers, two project portfolio managers, two line managers, and an external consultant, who acted as facilitator along the whole project duration.

The project, which was planned and executed within six months, provided five important deliverables, hereby described.

- *Project management role descriptions.* The three project managers' role descriptions – project manager A, project manager B, and project manager C – were reviewed to better clarify the responsibilities in relation to the nine project management knowledge areas. The differential elements between the three levels became quite evident, contributing to the project managers' awareness of what was required in each role. Also, the new role descriptions were better aligned to the Project Management Position Definitions, one of PMI's Career Framework Tools (Roecker, 2005).
- *Position requirements maps.* The list of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to cover each of the three project management positions were also reviewed in order to fit the new role descriptions. Project management skill (i.e. applied knowledge) requirements, for instance, was deployed into the nine knowledge areas, so that project managers are assessed against each of them individually with the benefit of identifying more focussed improvement areas. Also, the 'PM Compass' – a multiple choice project management knowledge assessment tool – was developed. The tool is today used for all internal position moves and external recruitments, ensuring an objective evaluation.
- *Role awareness interview.* To ensure that the role awareness is properly considered, a specific interview has been integrated into the project managers' assessment and recruitment process. The interview replicates the approach used during the role awareness workshops.
- *Competence and knowledge sharing.* In order to increase the awareness of the role, additional meeting opportunities for the members of the project management community were introduced. Beside regular newsletters and PMO web site updates, quarterly meetings were established. The 'PM Network' meeting has become an important event for sharing information, knowledge, experiences, lessons learned, as well as for discussing subjects of common interest.
- *Professional development opportunities.* The existing project management training catalogue had been reviewed and integrated with courses 'on demand', to be able to address potential gaps in any specific knowledge area. Additionally, project managers are encouraged to contribute to Company best practice improvements efforts by directly participating in PMO driven projects. Coaching has also been recognised as an integral part of the professional development process. Moreover, active involvement in external events (e.g. international congresses, benchmarking sessions) is promoted.

To Be Or Not To Be?

The experience earned through this project, in which traditional competence paradigms were subverted, challenged and transformed *our* awareness of the role that the PMO shall play within the organisation.

The original PMO mission statement – to drive excellence in project management competence and practices, and to coordinate management of TPCA project portfolio to assure best projects performance – maintains its relevance. The prioritisation of the activities aimed at accomplishing this mission has changed, though.

Our belief that the real asset of the Company lies in the competence of its project managers is today stronger than ever. A competence that certainly includes knowledge, skills and abilities but that is strongly influenced by the awareness of the role to be played.

Project management practices, methods and tools still represent the foundation of a successful project and thus they are continuously monitored and improved by PMO. However, our efforts are now directed towards fostering the development of a project management *community*, a social group whose individuals should be able to autonomously set project vision aligned to strategies, lead team members and stakeholders, master planning and execution to meet stakeholders' needs and expectations.

Eventually project managers might self-govern their community and consciously select, manage and improve practices, methods and tools.

And if this objective was achieved, would we still need a PMO? At this stage we do not have an answer, yet.

References

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