Thinking Like a Sponsor: How to Build a Driving Mindset
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Abstract

The paper is based on anecdotal research on how unmatched expectations influence the critical relationship between the Project Manager and the Sponsor. The most important attribute needed of a Project Manager for the Sponsor is the "Driving mindset". With this term the Sponsors expressed their expectations of a Project Manager who understands the company's overall strategy and is able to align the project goals to it, to manage and motivate people under stressful circumstances, to delegate, to listen and to ask questions.

While the experiences gained of developing the "Driving mindset" are published for the first time in this paper, the results of the original research on the Sponsors' (often unstated) expectations of the Project Manager are mainly reported as they appeared in the articles first published in "Project Manager Today" magazine (Garagna & Johnson, 2009).

Who's who on the project?

Often the Project Sponsor and Project Manager both work in the same organisation, in theory the Sponsor is a senior manager who decides that there is an opportunity to be pursued and appoints a Project Manager to execute the work; the Sponsor is "the person or group that provides the financial resource, in cash or in kind, for the project" (Project Management Institute, 2008, p. 441). Many organisations, however, encourage "initiative", in which case any individual may have an idea for improvement, which they suggest to the line manager who says: "Go ahead!". The employee, full of motivation, has become a Project Manager and the line manager has become the Sponsor, without either of them really knowing what is involved in their respective roles. There is no reason that such a venture would not be a success, in fact nearly all companies could point to some of their leading products, processes or services that started from such modest beginnings. There is also the case of "midnight projects" when there is an initiative by one or more employees, but since they have little or no faith in the management the work is done after hours, never appearing on the corporate radar screen until there is a sudden realisation of how important it is. Whatever the configuration, to build and maintain a strong relationship between these key stakeholders is critical for the success of every project.

Who contributed the results?

We used the opportunity provided by leading workshops with Project Managers and Sponsors, to conduct a series of structured interviews on their perceptions of the other party's role. The list of expectations has been gathered from participants in different countries, different industries, different organisational types and different levels. It is by no means, and it is not intended to be, a rigorous academic survey but what is interesting is the consistency of the results. The conclusions shine a clear light on the way both Sponsor and Project Managers should look at how they can educate each other to become the "ideal performer" in the role.

What do Sponsors expect of the Project Manager

In most cases a Sponsor will deal with several Project Managers at a time, and each of the Project Managers may well have more than one project under way. Consequently a Sponsor may be championing a dozen initiatives, all of which should contribute to the current and future success of the company. The Project Manager needs to be aware that no one person could run so many projects to any level detail, and the expectations of the Sponsor are largely based on this fact.

In order to translate the expectations of the Sponsor in a more tangible picture of a "competent" Project Manager, the interviews were structured according to 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 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, p. 20).

From the Sponsors interviewed, there was a surprising agreement not only about the characteristics of the ideal Project Manager but also about their relative importance. In fact the following attributes expected of a Project Manager are ranked in decreasing order of importance for the Sponsor:

1) Driving mindset

2) Business attitude

3) Project management skills

The labels chosen to characterise the attributes are the final result of a clustering technique (affinity diagramming method), which started by gathering from the Sponsors a set of desired qualities that the Project Manager should demonstrate (e.g. joyful, result-oriented). The following descriptions of the attributes have been developed using the same adjectives and qualities originally used by the participants interviewed.

Driving mindset

Think of a parallel of you buying a brand new home; you would like to engage an architect who will deliver, without any trouble, the house that will satisfy all needs and expectations. The architect will take care of all the technical details, handle the sub-contractors, analyse the risks and demonstrate overall competence and reliability. The Sponsor would like to deal with a self-motivated, professional, joyful, sensitive Project Manager, willing to take on responsibility for the project. A Project Manager who understands the company's overall strategy and is able to align the project goals to it, to manage and motivate people under stressful circumstances, to delegate, to listen and to ask questions. In short the Sponsor is looking for somebody that can do his job by delegating the achievement of the results! Paradoxical as it may seem, this is a very understandable wish, and a very useful competence worth developing for the Project Manager.

Business attitude

In the Sponsor's view, the Project Manager is first of all a "manager" who happens to be in charge of a project; an endeavour which makes business sense only if it is contributing to the overall strategy of the organisation to which they both belong. The Sponsor is again looking to the Project Manager hoping to see someone who would behave the way they behave themselves! The ideal Project Manager is focused, result-oriented, committed, assertive and proactive; a good problem solver, with strong negotiating skills and analytical thinking. This is the image of an entrepreneur, a scaled-down CEO managing the project as if it was his or her own business. According to this perspective, a project is a necessary labour that the organisation has to accept in order to achieve its goal and its technical side is just some stuff that needs to be worked on. This view is even more striking when we consider that most of the Sponsors we interviewed had started their careers in technical positions.

Project management skills

When Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel he was not very interested in what pigment would be used or how the plaster applied for the frescoes would not go mouldy, he had other projects on his mind, and naturally expected Michelangelo to master these techniques otherwise he would not have engaged him in the first place. So it is the with the Sponsor's expectation of project management skills, which are a must-have to apply for the job. They include command of the project management processes and "mechanics", planning and controlling skills. The basic toolbox also contains a softer side: good communication skills, precise expression, understanding and following guidelines, ability to learn and speak the language of the customer. Moreover, some personal characteristics like honesty, loyalty, ethical behaviour and civil responsibility are also required. A good understanding of the technical aspects of the project is considered a plus. The expectations about project management skills resemble what most Human Resource departments would describe as an "ideal" Project Manager: a professional with a good mix of hard and soft skills, combined with positive personal characteristics and ethical behaviour. Not so for the Sponsor, for whom these are just the tools of the artist. In fact the painter needs

brushes, colours and canvas to start the job but without a clear vision of what are the Patron's desires, no valuable painting can be produced.

Through the looking glass

It is worth noting how consistently the Sponsor tends to see the Project Manager more as a *business player* than a *technical expert*; an attitude linked to a view of the project as means of reaching the organisation's goals. This is worth noting because many Project Managers, due to their background, see themselves and their added value as *technical experts,* divorced from the business world due to lack of exposure to costs, budgets, profitability and, in most cases, any business incentive.

One finding from this input is these kinds of expectations can only be met by a small group of senior Project Managers, whose role and contribution is probably far undervalued. Someone who could meet the expectations and consistently deliver results is worth a considerably higher salary than those on display in job adverts.

Another intriguing finding is that nearly all project management training and development *only focuses on the lowest level expectation the Sponsor has of the Project Manager*. It is as if there is a belief that total mastery of the Project Manager's toolkit, through many hundreds of hours of study of vocabulary, definitions, processes, inputs, outputs, etc. will produce a "good" project manager. These findings throw very serious doubt on that belief, though, as we mentioned, this is not a rigorous academic study. However, these findings do underline the conclusions drawn by Professor Rodney Turner in his research of factors leading to project success (2007), that above a certain base level of project management knowledge, more knowledge does not a project manager more competent in that role.

So how *can* a Sponsor develop the priority attributes of a project manager, *Driving Mindset* and *Business Attitude* if there is so little formal training on the topics? It means that a Sponsor, committed to the success of the projects, has no alternative but that of personally investing in the professional development of their Project Managers by acting as a business mentor.

On the other hand, a more frequently asked question may be: how can a Project Manager develop him or herself to meet these, often unspoken, expectations? The easiest starting point is for the Project Manager to identify when they are in a "Sponsor-like" situation, and this is more probably going to be outside the current workplace as in it. We gave the example earlier of engaging an architect to build your "ideal home", in this way the Project Manager can genuinely "put themselves in the Sponsor's shoes". This is a real situation, but not one that many of us have had, or will have, the opportunity to experience. A more common example, although less high-level, would be one of taking your car to the mechanic to solve an unknown but potentially serious problem. How would you, as the owner of the car, like the mechanic to act? You could return at the end of the day for him to tell you he could make no progress due to a variety of more or less plausible excuses. You might find the car fixed, but at a cost far exceeding what you expected to pay. You might return to find the car in pieces and a frustrated mechanic telling you he's doing his best but hasn't found the cause of the problem yet. You might just return to find the car fixed, the mechanic gives you a quick rundown, in layman's terms, of his analysis, the chosen solution and presents you with a very reasonable bill. Which mechanic has met your expectations? Other similar familiar examples might include plumbers, hairdressers, tailors or home-decorators. Although the work they do is not on the same scale as a major project they can give clear insights on the Sponsor's expectations of *Driving Mindset* and *Business Attitude.*

Stepping into their shoes

In the six months that followed the publication of the original articles, the authors experimented with three complementary approaches:

1) A workshop on "Building Strong PM/Sponsor Relationships"

2) A series of coaching sessions for Project Managers

3) On the job experiences

All experiences provided interesting insights, even though from very different perspectives.

With regard to the workshop, the people who learned the most were, as usual, its authors: in fact we developed a

role-play based experience in which the participants, after having spent a considerable time criticizing a Sponsor, were asked to see the world from the latter's perspective. What's interesting is that, having decided to reuse a case study we had previously developed to help Project Managers deal with un-cooperative Sponsors, we discovered that even in a situation where the story has been built with a strong bias favouring the Project Manager perspective, the Sponsor's behaviour could indeed be understandable when looked at from the other side. No matter how negative a particular behaviour by a Sponsor can appear, it becomes understandable when we step into the shoes of one who has no alternative but to deal with an un-cooperative Project Manager.

The coaching approach, which has been tried on a broad range of participants, focused on helping each Project Manager to see the project and their role from the Sponsor's perspective. This was done by a simulation in which the Project Manager had to literally play the part of the Sponsor, while another participant played their role. These simulations were recorded on video and reviewed using a very precise scale of feedback. The first results seem very promising.

First of all during the event, the Project Manager who plays the role of their sponsor genuinely does take a step over to the "other side", which allows them to think differently about the project, its context and their own role & contribution. Following the event the Sponsors acknowledge having observed an increased determination on the part of the Project Manager to lead the project, and to criticize in a constructive way rather than complain about lack of support and input.

The on-the-job experiences are of great interest since, unlike the previous two, they did not take place in a workshop environment away from the demands of the daily work. However, the format used was similar to the one developed for the workshop: in preparation of important meetings with the Sponsor, the coach used focussed questions to help the Project Manager see the situation from the other party's perspective. Furthermore, when asked for feedback, the Sponsors formally recognised an increased quality of the project deliverables and of the Project Manager's performance, which in one case also resulted in the Project Manager being promoted, although we cannot guarantee this outcome every time, much as we would like to.

From these preliminary results, it looks like developing the highly desired "Driving Mindset", is not so difficult to achieve for the Project Manager, provided that the strategy chosen is that of focussing more on the relationship with the Sponsor than on project management methodology and tools.

Is this the usual plea for better communication? In fact we believe this is something more specific: we need to rediscover the ancient art of listening and applying empathy. What makes this difficult is the fact that both the Sponsor and Project Manager are under heavy work pressure, pressure that is not likely to decrease in the coming years, but that the Project Manager can greatly alleviate by stepping into the Sponsor's shoes.

References

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