



The Art of Project Management

A Report By Xalles Limited

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Introduction

This report takes a closer look at project management. To improve your skill and mastery of project management you need to combine the art and science of the craft. This report mentions science but examines the art in much more detail. Most good project managers are quite familiar with the elements of science in project management and most would pride themselves on these skills. We look closely at the art of project management. It is the art that is often the difference between success and failure on a large or complex project.

The Science

This report identifies 10 skill areas that are considered to be the science of project management. For any existing project manager the items in this list should be fairly self-explanatory. A good project manager will be skilled in these areas. In no particular order the skill areas of “Science” are:

1. Cost/budget control/resource management
2. Mastery of project management software
3. Communication skills
4. Planning and scheduling
5. Time management
6. Quality assurance
7. Meeting management
8. Legal knowledge (as required)
9. Documentation skills
10. Presentation skills

Being skilled in these areas, in addition to adequate knowledge of the subject matter of the project itself, will allow someone to effectively “administrate” a project. The problem is that even if all these skill items are performed with proficiency, there are many opportunities for complex projects to fail.

So what is missing?



The Art

This report identifies an additional 10 skill areas which we consider the “Art” of project management. The list of “Art” skills are not ranked in any particular order:

1. Team management
2. Business savvy
3. Problem solving
4. Strategic thinking
5. Marketing and spin control
6. Leadership skills (Motivation)
7. Negotiating skills
8. Mediation skills
9. Cultural awareness and sensitivity (International knowledge)
10. Training

Team Management

It is not enough to have the right number of resources assigned to a project. The group dynamics can be more important than the number of people in the group. How do you turn an organization into a team? The art of building and managing a team means understanding each person's strengths and weaknesses, their personality and behavioural tendencies, and their opinions about the project and the other team members. Not getting into this psychological level means that you will be skimming the surface on your team and hoping that they work well together. A small team, well designed and constructed can outperform any large unorganized team every time. Focus on team building. Do not discount the affect that team bonding has on performance. It doesn't take a lot of time for the project manager to create an activity that allows people to bond and come together as a team. Do not skip this step for any complex project. You have heard the modern buzz phrases and clichés; "the team is starting to gel", "we are in the zone", "everything is working", "the team is on fire". This is the result of a leader understanding group dynamics and nurturing the organization to become a highly effective and managed team.

Business Savvy

Business savvy sums up a collection of skills that involves "political" understanding and know-how. Being able to deal with all your project stakeholders is critical. Understanding the nature of relationships with your project sponsors, champions and the motivation of each of those individuals will help you greatly on any difficult project. It's often the people involved and working environment versus the project constraints that make a project most difficult. Working effectively in the midst of the inevitable political dynamics of a project means developing a plan for each party. Once the research and knowledge have been acquired, you will often need to create a unique communication plan for each individual to control their tendencies where the project could be negatively affected. If you manage the political dynamics affecting a project you have the opportunity to manage the project results.

Problem Solving

This seems like an obvious addition to this list of "art" skills, however, there is a large range of problem solving skill sets. Improving your project manager's and your teams' skills in technical and business problem solving can pave the way to successful project results. Any complex project will involve tough problems to solve during the project lifecycle. The science skills listed above are often not enough to see a successful resolution to all problems. Advanced problem solving involves analysis to separate the problem from the symptoms and identify the "right" problem to solve. This needs to be followed by appropriate objective setting. Only then can a series of separate creative and critical thinking sessions be used to optimize the ideas generated to solve the correct problem. The project manager often has to carefully manage the flow of ideas, both creative and critical in order to obtain a good result. These skills are not developed easily, but must be strived towards to become a complete project manager.

Strategic Thinking

While strategic planning is the skill of selecting and executing against existing strategies, strategic thinking is the development of new approaches using creativity. Strategic thinking involves seeing the big picture in the long term. It means combining the skills of visioning, creative thinking, critical thinking, and business design. All these elements, when applied to a project setting, can enable leaders to have foresight into likely project roadblocks, and define risk mitigation plans early enough to be effective. A strategic thinking project manager can perform feats that most could never imagine. They can save millions on project budgets, change timeframes and occasionally avert crisis situations.

Marketing and Spin Control

On any large scale project, the project manager is doing more than executing against a plan, the project manager needs to be marketing its results, setbacks and successes to many stakeholders. Marketing involves product packaging for the project and its results. It also involves having a theme tied to the project mission which internal team members as well as third parties can easily identify with. Project marketing involves the job of persuading people to follow and support your cause throughout the project. Spin control is the difficulty of communicating bad news about the project in such a way that the entire project will not be sabotaged. The art of doing this is being able to tell the truth, while at the same time tell stakeholders how the problem's fallout is being mitigated and how the problem itself is being solved. The spin control role is critical so that the project team can remain productive during the critical crisis periods of the project while external people remain in contact with project progress.

Leadership Skills (Motivation)

Each project manager for a large scale project needs to be a strong leader. The art of leadership involves knowing when to delegate, when to jump in and roll up your sleeves, when to coach and when to keep your opinions to yourself. The best leaders provide the right type of training to whom and when it's needed. Leaders know when its time to support versus discipline team members. Leaders know how to create a vision for success and then motivate and encourage the entire team to strive for that vision. Leadership is not given but earned during the project. Leaders need the respect of the team and they need to demonstrate their leadership abilities early and often in the project lifecycle.

Negotiating Skills

Negotiating skills are important in any business setting, but for complex projects, the project manager is quite often thrust into negotiation situations. These situations include the battles over common resources, sponsorship, and support for the project. One-on-one negotiations are often conducted using the project variables of time, money and deliverables as bargaining chips. The successful project manager has to first and foremost value the objectives of the project and their organization. Secondly, the project manager needs to find a way to get the other party what they want, whether or not they have the direct ability to get it for them. This is often the art form of "cashing in favours", or making trades for seemingly unrelated items in order to accomplish the goals.



Mediation Skills

Just as frequently as the one-on-one negotiations arise, complex group negotiations take place that involve multiple parties who each have their own objectives relative to the project. In these situations the project manager needs to use advanced negotiation techniques to align the group into common goals and actions. The art of mediation skills is having knowledge of the motivation of each individual or party involved and then combining the skills of marketing, leadership and negotiating. The fine art of knowing when to push, when to pull, when to present, when to persuade, and when to be quiet, are all pieces of the mediation puzzle. Mediation is knowing all the egos in the room and finding a way for people to “save face”, while progress can be made.

Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity (International Knowledge)

As many large scale projects involve project teams from multiple countries or even regions within the same country, cultural awareness and sensitivity are important skills for a project manager to have in their repertoire. This starts with understanding the working styles of the team itself and then understanding the cultures and natural preferences of the stakeholders with which the team will be interacting with. Major project delays can result when these cultural differences are not accounted for and anticipated. People of varying cultures learn in different ways, interpret words and phrases in different ways, negotiate in different ways, manage projects in different ways and manage people in different ways. The art of project management includes doing formal research as well as interviewing people involved about their preferences and work styles. This time invested early in the project will pay off when times are tougher and could avoid a potential project failure as well.

Training

Project managers often struggle because they do not have good training skills in their arsenal. It’s important for any project manager to learn how to design effective training and to learn how to deliver training efficiently. No project team will arrive with all the necessary skills and experience. During long projects there is inevitably the need for training and only the project manager who understands the world of training design and delivery can ensure that each person gets the training they need, when they need it, and in a format that will result in effective and efficient learning. Any project manager should learn about basic adult learning principles as part of their basic project management boot camp.



Conclusion

“A moment's insight is sometimes worth a life's experience.” This quote is by poet and author, Oliver Wendell Holmes. He may have understood the art of project management better than most project managers. Simply having a lot of experience managing projects does not make someone a great project manager. Taking a few moments to consider new and better ways to combine the art and science of project management can make all the difference.

It is the combination of the Art and Science of project management that enables a project team to be successful. Look for opportunities to turn your organization's project managers into superior project managers.





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