

Project Manager Success Criteria

By Robert Youker

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The thesis of this article is that there is overwhelming evidence that exam-based PM certification systems and project management bodies of knowledge do **not** measure the most important factors for success in managing projects. To prove this point I will summarize research by Professor Owen Gadeken of the Defense Systems Management College at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, Professor John Kotter of the Harvard Business School and a recent book by Justin Menkes.

Owen Gadeken has conducted more than five research studies over the last dozen years to identify what are the most important competencies for a project manager to have success. All of the studies utilized the critical incident method of research and follow-up surveys where outstanding PMs are interviewed to identify what they do that makes them so effective. (for details on the approach and results see: Gadeken, Owen, *What the Defense Systems Management College Has Learned From Ten Years of Project Leadership Research*, Proceedings of PMI® Research Conference 2000 p 274 – 256).

The research resulted in defining the following eight behaviors of the best project managers:

1. *“Are strongly committed to a clear mission*
2. Have a long term and big picture perspective
3. Are both systematic and innovative thinkers
4. Find and empower the best people for their teams
5. Are selective in their involvement in project issues
6. Focus on external stakeholders
7. *Thrive on relationships and influence*
8. Proactively gather information and insist on results

Note: Italicized competencies differentiate top performers.”

I think it is obvious that a certification exam cannot measure a prospective PM’s competency in these 8 categories. It is also clear that current bodies of knowledge only cover perhaps half of these factors, but without the necessary emphasis for a PM to know where he/she should concentrate their effort.

Dr. Gadeken summarizes his studies as follows: “However, an emerging view of the project management profession is that while technical and managerial expertise are important, the primary role of project managers is to provide the leadership focus for their projects.” Owen concludes that this implies, “This includes carefully structuring processes for selection, assessment and development of project managers ...” The required behavioral skills in gaining

influence and getting groups to commit to objectives are difficult to assess and innovative approaches are required.

Professor John P. Kotter of the Harvard Business School published an article entitled, *What effective general managers really do*, in the November-December 1982 Harvard Business Review. This was a follow-up to similar research by others including Henry Mintzberg in his book and article, *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Harper & Row (1973). The conclusion of all of this research was, to quote Kotter: “A rather large gap exists between the conventional wisdom on management functions, tools and systems on the one hand and actual managerial behavior on the other. The former is usually discussed in terms of planning, controlling, staffing, organizing, and directing”.

This was consistent with the thinking of the time; a typical example, from The Lewis Group, identified the actions of planning, organizing, leading, directing and controlling. The Kotter study focused on a group of successful general managers and consisted of interviews, questionnaires and observations. These various studies all found that actual managerial behavior did not consist of Planning etc., but was *much less programmed*.

Project managers are in effect mini-general managers, so the results of Kotter’s and the others’ research are relevant for Project Managers also. In fact the project manager track is an excellent way for organizations to develop future general managers who gain a view of many different functions of a business. This is in contrast to someone who has grown up in just one function.

Kotter found effective GMs concentrated their effort on three behaviors as follows:

1. Agenda setting
2. Network building
3. Execution: getting networks to implement agendas.

Kotter defines the dilemma facing a new general manager in terms that sound exactly like the challenges facing a new PM.

1. “Figuring out what to do despite uncertainty, great diversity, and an enormous amount of potentially relevant information.
2. Getting things done through a large and diverse set of people despite having little control over most of them”.

Effective general managers develop agendas for what they want to accomplish consisting of “loosely connected goals and plans that address their long, medium and short term responsibilities”. They do this with informal discussions with a very wide range of people, especially by asking questions.

Kotter also found that effective executives, “allocate significant time and effort when they first take their jobs to developing a network of cooperative relationships among those people they feel are needed to satisfy their emerging agendas – including outsiders”. Does this not sound like a Project Managers job? Do popular PM certification processes measure this? Do they succeed in

creating the appropriate “environment” (norms and values) they feel is necessary to implement their agenda?

Then comes execution. “After they have developed their networks and agendas, effective GMs tend to shift their attention toward using the networks to implement their agendas. They marshal their interpersonal skills, budgetary resources, and information to influence people and events in a variety of direct and indirect ways.”

Does this again seem similar to the effective PM’s job? Does the PM literature discuss this in a way that a potential project manager could learn how to actually perform these behaviors in a real situation? “Excellent performers ask, encourage, cajole, praise, reward, demand, manipulate, and generally motivate others with great skill in face-to-face situations.” Are these behaviors measured in the certification processes, outside those of IPMA and *asapm*?

Kotter draws several conclusions that are relevant to the project management situation today.

1. “Management training courses probably overemphasize formal tools, unambiguous problems and situations that deal simplistically with human relationships.
2. Another example of inappropriate courses is those that emphasize formal quantitative tools.
3. The formal planning systems within which many GMs must operate probably hinder effective performance.”

Justin Menkes has recently written a new book, "Executive Intelligence" that maintains that the key factor for executive success is "superior reasoning and problem solving skills that enable the executive to cut thru the fog of conflicting data and create a solution tailored to suit each situation at hand." He lists 17 critical skills that best managers use to think their way through problems. He says the best way to find people with these skills is an oral group examination with hypothetical business problems. Do the questions on the PMP® examination measure this?

For a conclusion I will quote from an article by Kate Belzer, *Project Management: Still More Art than Science*, CNIDR Isearch. “Today’s project manager must be able to apply the processes, tools, and techniques of the trade efficiently and effectively to be successful. **However, without mastering the timeless soft skills to supplement the hard skills, few project managers will succeed.**”

I think it is clear that behavioral skills are most important and that they cannot be learned by reading a guide nor be measured by a simple certification process based on a multiple choice test. Instead sophisticated methods of assessment, selection and coaching are required to insure that potential project managers have the requisite behavioral skills including problem solving and emotional intelligence.

About the Author



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Robert “Bob” Youker is a prolific writer, speaker, and spokesperson for PM practice around the World. A co-founder of both Project Management Institute, and *asapm*, the American Society for the Advancement of Project Management, he is a long-time contributor to the practice of project management. In addition to the above founding feats, he was a Director of IPMA from 1977 through 1988, taking the seat formerly occupied by Russ Archibald. In addition to his years of service to PMI, he participated and presented in many IPMA Conferences from 1974 through the early 2000s. He presented keynotes at several of them, and organized panels and workshops in others. He introduced IPMA into a dozen government agencies and businesses all over the World, and in many cases, connected those agencies and businesses with IPMA leaders. Bob introduced and popularized innovations to the practice of project management, from his work in Xerox in the 1960s, to his leadership in the first manual project management planning and tracking tools (Planalog President, 1968-1974). He published an early book on the Critical Path Method, *Analysis Bar Charting*, by John Mulvaney. As of today, that book has sold more than 30,000 copies. In his work for World Bank, Bob developed training that has benefited thousands of project and program managers, and government officials, mostly in developing countries. He performed that training in over a dozen developing countries around the World over a 30 year period, and continues today, to help developing and developed nations. He was the author and developer of the World Bank’s CD-ROM based project management training kit titled “Managing the Implementation of Development Projects”, still available and widely used today. In the 1970s, to increase Executive visibility for the fledgling practice of project management, Bob engineered the publishing of a Harvard Business Review collection of articles on the subject. He suggested the collection, but was told there were not enough articles for a special collection. He bought copies of the articles, submitted them, and the Harvard Business Review published one of their most popular reprint series, with a number of classic articles on project management. Bob Youker has contributed massively to the profession or practice of project management, to *asapm*, to IPMA, and to society. He continues to teach several two-week project management courses each year for participants from developing countries at the International Law Institute in Georgetown, Washington, DC, USA. Bob can be contacted at bobyouker@att.net.

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