

PM Talents Are Nutrition of Economic Growth

Interview with Prof Lin Shaopei¹

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Journalist's Introduction

Lin Shaopei is a professor of the Institute of Engineering Management, Shanghai Jiaotong University in China. For his extraordinary contribution to PM profession, he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award of PMI (China) in 2012, the Excellent Service Award of ICE in 2015 and the Service Achievement Award of PMI GAC in 2016. He has published nine books and more than 200 papers in Chinese and international journals, conferences covering a variety of disciplines, including AI, engineering, economics, system engineering, computational mechanics, computer application, and fuzzy mathematics applications, etc.

Having been in this profession for over three decades, Professor Lin Shaopei takes PM promotion and talent cultivation as his obligation. Though he majored in Science engineering in college, he changed his career to project management to “follow the tide” in 1980s. In his eyes, life itself is about identifying trends and adapting yourself to the tendencies. It turned out that

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he made a successful career transformation as he has become a distinguished figure in project management.

As a journalist, I'm impressed by Professor Lin Shaopei's enthusiasm for this profession and professional spirit. Though in his eighties, he is still active in devoting himself to studying project management in VUCA era. During the interview, he was busy with an exchange visit in Israel but he delivered what he had promised so that the interview article can be published on time, to which I owe my sincere gratitude. In my eyes, Professor Lin Shaopei is a gentleman with universal love as he puts prosperity of the country and the profession before his own fame and interests. It's the honor of our PM community to have such dedicated promoters as Professor Lin Shaopei.

Interview

Q1: You've noted that prosperity of a nation depends on economic growth and the growth of economy depends on projects. Would you please elaborate on this view?

Lin Shaopei (Shaopei): The project is the economic cell of society. Without best practices and successful projects, there will be no economic prosperity of a nation. In other words, if you want the cells of your body to be stronger, you need to have nutrition and physical exercise. For a country, if you want the projects to be successful, you really need PM talents and favorite social environment. Here, PM talents are similar to nutrition and favorite environment such as government policies, soundness of legislation system as well as prosperous market potentiality etc., is like physical exercise for growing the cells.

Q2: Under the One Belt and Road Initiative, more Chinese enterprises will "go out". In terms of risk management, would you please offer them some tips? What are the major causes for overseas project failure?

Shaopei: During my five years' theoretical and practical site visit's investigation (2010-2014) in the Sino-UK joint research project on the overseas construction and investment behavior of Chinese enterprises, I have had a deep understanding about this problem and concluded that besides the conventional political, economic, legislative, cultural, technical and management risks, the failure of Chinese enterprises are caused by their decision makers who have stepped into the "Decision Traps". There are nine decision traps, namely:

1. Trap of mis-understanding (by fickleness and extreme)
2. Trap of lost control (by chaos in thinking philosophy)
3. Trap in mis-direction (by blind judgment)
4. Trap in lack of investigation (by great determination under less information)
5. Trap in mis-judgment (by experientialism and dogmatism)
6. Trap in moral insufficiency (by swindle and failure in good faith)

7. Trap in learning insufficiency (less leadership by lack of diligence)
8. Trap in irresponsibility (by less professional ethics)

Moreover, the implicit risks are more severe than the explicit risks mentioned above. The problem lies in its implicitness, severity and difficulty in removal. The implicit risks can be moved only if the “soft power” of the enterprises and its staffs would be approached to the international market standard. The “soft power” is not only to be represented by the military and economic potentialities, but more importantly by the market behavior of enterprises as well as the personal qualification of its staffs.

Q3: As you have emphasized, in practice we should combine western project management knowledge with China’s actual situation. Would you like to explain more on this topic?

Shaopei: As in VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) era nowadays, the rigid management philosophy based on industrial economy is no longer appropriate; instead, the flexible governance ideas are more accommodating. It is time that one should act based on “project governance” idea rather than on “project management” mindset in the past. It is well known that Chinese traditional culture (for instance, Taiji Logic, the Chinese wisdom for project governance) possesses tremendous elements in soft treatment of contradictory events; there is a huge space of using Chinese cultural essence to deal with the management issues in VUCA era not only in China but also elsewhere.

Q4: Since ancient times, China has had its own project management such as *The Art of War*. What are the shining points of Chinese-style project management?

Shaopei: In my view, the essence of Chinese culture is the “Unification of two opposites”. It is reflected not only in the “The Art of War”, but also in different issues, as a universal truth. For instance, in the governing principles of ancient China, it tells us the way to be a leader, one must insist on character-building, to guard against greed, be frugal and diligent, refrain from anger, emulate good deeds and correct his / her own mistakes, ... A project manager, as the leader of the project, needs to be respectful of relatives, to do self-reflection, once he (she) wants to perform his (her) leadership. It’s the way of Chinese culture to unify two opposites — the leader and the people to be led.

Q5: You’ve identified Organizational Project Management as one of the future trends of PM. Why?

Shaopei: Essentially, project management is to make a series of decisions amid uncertainties for the purpose of realizing project goals. In digital era, project management is performed via the platform of the Internet, the “organization” on the platform is no longer a concrete and solid body, but a hierarchical network of transferring and reproducing information across different organizational layers up and down. The whole procedure of project management is essentially the process of transferring, reproducing information across different layers of the organizational framework to managing the team activities for the comprehensive project implementation. Therefore, organizational project management will be the one of

future PM trends in Internet era. Theoretically, the real organization is no more essential in digital era, because with the help of artificial intelligence and big data technologies, project management can be implemented by a series of well-organized information/data flow over the Internet.

Q6: You won the Lifetime Achievement Award of PMI (China) in 2012. What does that mean to you?

Shaopei: It is an encouragement for my long-term involvement in PM promotion, and it is still a further driving force for me to promote PM and to engage myself in the cause, especially in talent cultivation of PM.

I understand the importance of PM for the economic development of a nation, which is directly related to people's wellbeing. I also understand that without enough qualified PM talents there will not be sufficient PM best practices, which will hinder the nation's economic growth. I must study hard about the characteristics of PM ecology under Internet era in order to reform our PM education for cultivating "up to date" talents accommodating to future PM development. Moreover, we need to integrate the essence of Chinese traditional culture for healthy development of PM under VUCA environment; that would be the feedback elements contributed from Chinese PM practices.

Q7: For what reason did you change your research focus from science to management over 30 years ago?

Shaopei: The meaning of life is how one could be accommodating to the tendency of social development and devoting oneself to this tendency. As China opened up to the rest of the world forty years ago, project growth bloomed and boundless economic activities remained to be well managed. Thus, the importance of PM is getting obvious, and there was an urgent need to transfer considerable amount of technical talents into different managerial sectors. In early 1980s, while I was working for a Chinese oil company and engaged in the offshore oil exploration, we negotiated with international oil companies for risk investment of exploring Chinese offshore oil fields. That was essentially one of the first series of PPP-like projects in China and indeed a topic of international finance and risk management. Under such circumstances, I had to abandon my profession in engineering science and get involved in economics and management. I self-learned the western economics, legislation of contracts, finance operation as well as the knowledge of project management for accommodating the subversive challenges faced. I had no choice but to do it that way, since it represents one's adaptability to the environmental challenges, and it is also the effort of realizing the value and meaningfulness of one's life.

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About the Interviewer



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