

IPMA Education and Training Series¹

The Iron Triangle Under Threat!

By Ed Naughton
IPMA Education & Training Board Member

For over forty years the discipline of project management has been characterised by the icon of the **Iron Triangle** showing the triple constraint of time, cost and scope. Dr. Martin Barnes, IPMA Fellow and legend in the project management community was the individual accredited with coining this term in 1969.



Project managers operating under this construct were primarily seen as implementers of solutions with a focus on technical, budget, schedule and specification issues.

It would appear that we are now at a stage to consider new paradigms similar to the iron triangle but representing the changing face of project management. Could such an icon/symbol have as powerful and enduring influence as the “iron triangle”?

In 2006 the IPMA published version 3 of its Competence Baseline which was characterised by its **Eye of Competence** logo. The Eye represents clarity and vision of the requisite **Technical**, **Behavioural** and **Contextual** competences required by an effective project manager.



¹ This series of articles is by members of the IPMA Education and Training (E&T) Board on the subject of project management education, training, careers and related topics. More information about the IPMA E&T can be found at <http://ipma.ch/education>.

In essence, the Eye of Competence embodies the integration of all elements of project management as seen through the eyes of the project manager.

At the 2012 PMI Global Congress in Vancouver I listened with great interest to the opening address delivered by Mark A. Langley, President and CEO of the Project Management Institute. The central tenet of the address was that “*the role of the project manager is rapidly changing to the role of a business leader*” and the questions posed to the audience were

Are You Ready ... to become a project leader?

- Do you have the skills that the executives in your organization are looking for?
- Do you know what those skills are?
- Can you connect what you do every day to your organization's business objectives?

In an excellent delivery, Mark then went on to outline and describe the three major skillsets that tomorrow's project leader needs to possess i.e. **Technical, Leadership** and **Strategic** skills - the **Talent Triangle**.



Could this be the new symbol of project management in the second decade and beyond of the 21st century?

It is strikingly similar to the Eye of Competence, seemingly differing only in the nomenclature - Leadership and Strategy versus Behavioural and Contextual and prompted one observer to remark that the IPMA appeared to be ready in 2006. It also appears to represent some form of a consensus on the profile of the future project manager by the world's two most respected professional organizations IPMA and PMI.

Embracing this new vision will mean that a new breed of project executive will emerge— project managers prepared with the skills and capabilities to deliver excellence today and into the future. Technical competence while essential is no longer enough.

Organizations and individuals will now have to focus more on developing the two other sides of the triangle - leadership and strategic management skills. How realistic

and achievable is this? Is this a future state that is attainable or an aspirational expression of where the project management community would like to be?

This shift will require new thinking not only on the human resources front but across the entire executive suite. Will they buy into this new vision of the project leader and invest accordingly?

It would appear that there is a long road to travel. In the 2012 Irish **Annual Survey of Practitioners** only 27% of respondents agreed that:

- *there was a clear promotion path for project managers in their organization and*
- *project management should be a full-time career path*

Over the last two years we have also offered our Strategic Project Management Diploma which embraces in depth, leadership development and strategic business management. This attracts an experienced and nuanced audience that in numbers reflects only a fraction of those attending lower level certified programmes.

A key question is – does the executive identify project managers as part of the future talent pool to invest in or do they look to the high performers in the traditional organization organization functions (Marketing, Operations, Finance, Engineering etc.)? It would appear that the answer is probably the latter based on the above survey findings. Perhaps this draws the debate all the way back to the old chestnut – is project management a discipline or a profession?

Another subtle consideration is in the title. Will we still talk about project managers or will the title change to project leaders? In business, **Management** can be measured by the ability to deliver results through a process, often by applying technical knowledge, whereas **Leadership** demands that results are achieved through the application of people skills.

If the Talent Triangle concept is embraced and rolled out, what will it mean for the certification of project managers? The IPMA internationally recognised four level certification system has been structured for many years to assess competency across the three legs of the eye/ triangle and to certify accordingly.

What will be the impact on the current PMI certification structure? Will new levels be introduced? Will the term “project leader” mean something fundamentally different to “project manager” and spawn another set of certification titles and credentials?

The Education and Training business in the project management sector looks set to benefit. New programmes and courses under the Leadership and Strategy banners are likely to emerge. These may be targeted not just at the project management community but at those in general management also.

As the iron triangle goes jingle jangle, maybe we should not only ask the question - Are You Ready? - but also - Are we sure we know where we are going?

About the Author



ED NAUGHTON

Institute of Project Management

Dublin, Ireland

Ed Naughton, BE, C. Eng., F.I.E.I, FIPMA, IPMA-a, PMP, is the founder and current Director General of the Institute of Project Management of Ireland, the leading authority on the PM profession in Ireland. On the international front, Ed was responsible for initiating cooperation agreements with both the PMI (Project Management Institute) USA and the IPMA (International Project Management Association). He is Ireland's representative on the IPMA council of delegates, and a former Vice President-Marketing for the IPMA. He was also the first PMP registered in Ireland. Ed has researched, published and presented many articles and papers on project management and is the author of the Irish Project Management Competence Baseline. During his thirty year career, Ed has worked as a project manager and/or project management consultant on a large variety of high profile domestic and international assignments. Ed Naughton is a graduate of University College Dublin (BE, civil), a Fellow of the Institute of Engineers of Ireland, a Chartered Engineer (Ireland), a Professional Engineer in Canada, and holds an IPMA Level A certification. He is former founder and editor of the quarterly international publication "Project Management Practice". One of Ireland's most respected experts on the topic of modern project management, Ed is an executive advisor to PM World in Ireland. Ed Naughton was named a Fellow of IPMA in 2013. Ed lives in Dublin and can be contacted at ed@projectmanagement.ie.