

The other three groups of causes of failure identified in the second article will also be discussed in the context of how they may affect the “Project management” success level, focusing mainly on leadership-related causes.

LEVEL 1: “PROJECT MANAGEMENT” SUCCESS – “doing the project right”

The first article in this series quoted Cooke-Davies’ 2004 question, *Was the project done right?* as epitomizing Level 1: “Project management” success.

Traditionally, “project management” success has been associated with achieving prescribed cost, time and quality/ scope/performance objectives. Morris 2013 says:

Level 1, the technical core, is pre-eminently delivery oriented. It is concerned with the management of the project’s technical operations: writing code, testing, designing, building, fabricating, and, in project management terms, with scope, schedule, and cost planning and monitoring. The key concern is how to deliver projects efficiently: ...”on time, in budget, to scope”.

These have long been highly familiar themes in the project management literature.

RELATING PROJECT MANAGEMENT OPERATIONAL-RELATED CAUSES OF FAILURE WITH LEVEL 1: “PROJECT MANAGEMENT” SUCCESS

The components of project management operational-related causes of failure

PM operational-related causes of failure

Poor project planning (2)
No agreed project life cycle
Poor scope management
Poor cost control (3)
Poor quality assurance
Manpower issues (2)
Poor communications (2)
Poor risk management
Poor contract mgt. (4)
Poor change control (2)
Problems with concurrency

Project management operational-related causes of failure identified in the second article of this series appear to be the group of causes which are most relevant to Level 1: “Project management” success. These are shown on the left. I have used the descriptor “operational-related” in the same sense as Morris’ “technical operations” above.

It is again emphasised that the causes of project failure data from the sampling in the second article do not claim to be necessarily representative of the wider project management scene. However, it is difficult to ignore the fact that this sampling showed operational-related causes as representing something of the order of a third of all causes of failure cited. This would appear to be a disturbingly high figure, even if not fully representative.

Most of the eleven components of this group of failures are standard items common to most project management standards and educational programs.

Even more disturbing is the fact that most of these causes of failure are bread-and-butter components of project management. Most of them are topics which are widely covered in project management bodies of knowledge, competency standards, and education programs, and have been for quite some time. Therefore, one might reasonably have expected much better performance than is indicated by the above project failure data associated with these topics. This raises questions at two levels:

- What might this suggest about the effectiveness of the broader project management community's efforts in setting standards, educational programs, and the like?
- What might this suggest at the level of organizations undertaking projects?

How effective have the broader project management community's efforts in setting standards, educational programs, etc, been?

The frequencies of citation of operational-related causes of failures are not necessarily easy to understand, particularly in the light of the intensive efforts made by the project management community over many years, which should have helped ameliorate most of these operational causes of failure – e.g.

- Increased development of detailed project management standards;
- Proliferation of books, papers and articles on project management;
- Increased professionalism of member associations;
- Greatly increased focus on education and training in project management;
- Accreditation of increasingly large numbers of project managers world-wide.

One explanation could be that the project management operational-related cause group sampled in the second article is so widely unrepresentative of projects at large, that things are not nearly as bad as they appear to be from the above figures. This might be so – but we are desperately short of supporting data.

We need much more validated data on the current situation

The reality is that we simply do not have nearly enough validated data to know what the current situation really is. The overall lack of validated information about project successes and failures at large was discussed in some detail in the first paper of this series, and corresponding dearth of information on causes of failures in the second paper.

The second article concluded with the following recommendation:

A suggestion (or challenge) here is for global project management organisations (IPMA, PMI, apfpm, etc) to jointly create a framework to develop and share project success/ failure data, covering the widest possible range of project management application areas. This would include

- *Developing and agreeing common criteria for project success / failure;*
- *Collecting and sharing validated data on success/ failure rates;*
- *Researching and sharing validated data on success drivers / failure causes.*

We also need validated data on success / failure trends over time

Not only are we deficient in current data, but we have virtually no validated data on how the project success / failure situation may have changed over the longer term, particularly in the past couple of decades. So we have little, if any hard data to help answer questions as to how effective our collective efforts may have been in improving “project management” success rates over time.

Within the project management community we have many different opinions on the latter, varying from very optimistic and self-congratulatory, to rankly pessimistic, and fearing that success rates on projects have not improved at all in the past decade or so. Who is right? No-one knows. It is again emphasised that we do need hard data on project success / failure trends over time to rectify this deficiency.

This naturally leads to extending the above recommendation as follows.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, if we continued to collect and build on such data, over a period of time we would have solid validated trend data, and therefore be in a properly informed position to assess the ongoing effectiveness of our educational and allied efforts to improve project management operational performance, and to take appropriate actions.

Operational-related causes of failures at individual organizational levels

It should first be recognized that there are two very different types of organizations that undertake projects. I borrow from Cooke-Davies 2002 in describing them as project-based and production-based organizations, and from Archibald et al 2012 (who use different descriptors) in describing them:

- **Project-based organizations** derive most (if not all) of their revenue and/or other benefits from creating and delivering projects / programs to external customers.
- **Production-based organizations** derive most (if not all) of their revenue and/or benefits from producing and selling products and services. They utilize projects to create new, or improve existing, products and services; enter new markets; or otherwise improve or change their organizations.

Project-based organizations

All my forty years direct project experience before joining academe were in project-based organizations. If these organizations performed poorly in operational-related activities, they would go out of business. The organizations I worked for did not fail on this account. Although I can’t speak for project-based organizations at large, this factor does appear to provide stronger incentives to perform well than may exist in production-based organizations.

Production-based organizations

I have never worked in production-based organizations, so have nothing to offer from direct experience. However, in academe I had many mature-aged students who worked in production-based organizations which undertook projects, and were not receiving much help or education in their own organizations in project management. Although not necessarily representative of all production-based organizations, the perceived lack of inbuilt incentives to perform well contrasts sharply with my experience in project-based organizations.

RELATING INITIATION-RELATED CAUSES OF FAILURE WITH LEVELS 1 & 2

Project initiation-related causes of failure strongly affect both Success Levels

In Figure 3-2 the fifteen project initiation-related causes of failure are divided into three primary sub-groups, titled “needs-&requirements-related”, “feasibility-related”, and “project definition-related” causes. The main attributes of each sub-group are outlined, together with their perceived impacts on both Success Levels 1 and 2.

PROJECT INITIATION-RELATED causes of failure	Notes on the main attributes of each sub-group	Perceived impacts on Success Levels 1 & 2
No owner/user involvement (3) Unrealistic expectations (3) Overzealous advocacy Poor sales/marketing links Incomplete requirements (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are first concerned with determining and/or confirming the business (or equivalent) needs of the client • When this has been done, the requirements of a project (or projects) to best help satisfy these needs can then be properly specified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Needs-&requirements-related causes are directly related to Success Level 2: ○ “Doing the right project”. ○ But If the right project is not chosen, Success Level 1 is also compromised
Problems re technology (3) Poor systems engineering Funding difficulties Inadequate estimating (2) No value engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are primarily technical-related activities to help establish the feasibility of the project, & accurately define it. • These are primarily financial-related activities to help establish the feasibility of the project, & accurately define it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Feasibility-related causes impact most directly on the accuracy of the project definition, and thence Success L1 ○ However, they may also compromise the project’s “rightness” – i.e. Success L 2
Unclear success criteria Unrealistic project baselines Poor project definition (3) Changing sponsor strategy Commitment escalation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally speaking, these project-definition related causes come about through inadequacies in one or more of the previous sub-groups of causes • These could happen at any time, but are essentially initiation-related, even if occurring in later phases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Project definition-related causes impact most directly on Success L1 ○ However, if the processes leading to project definition have been defective, we may no longer have the right project indicating a Success Level 2 failure

Figure 3-2: Linking sub-groupings of project initiation-related causes of failure with Success Levels 1 & 2

To state the obvious, deficient performance in earlier components of this list of initiation-related causes of failure will necessarily result in deficiencies in later components, which I have tried to indicate with the vertical dashed arrows in the left box in Figure 3-2. This follows rather naturally, particularly if one associates each grouping with early phases of the project life cycle, which I will be examining in some detail in the fourth article of this series.

The right hand box in Figure 2 suggests how these three groups of causes of failure impact on Success Levels 1 and 2. There appear to be two distinct sectors here.

If there are failures in the “Needs-&-requirements-related” sector, the right project will not be chosen, and no-matter what happens later, “doing the project right” (Success Level 1) becomes less relevant to overall success of the project.

Even if the right project were initially chosen, there are still opportunities for failures in the following two initiation sectors to result in a defective project definition, which means a project that falls short of being the “right project”. Again, Success Level 1 will also become less relevant to overall project success.

Both situations are summarised in the question.

If the “right project” is not being done, due to failures in project initiation, how relevant does “doing the project right” become?

This appears to me to be a key question, and one of great importance to the project management community.

Implications for individual project managers

If a project fails because it is not the “right project”, the project manager will generally be blamed for the failure, even if the project was “done right”, (or as near as you can get to “right” with defective project initiation). The only exceptions I can think of are in situations such as traditional construction contracting, or similar.

Therefore, in most cases the individual project manager has a strong vested interest in ensuring that all project initiation activities have been properly done – i.e. that the “right project” is being undertaken – before agreeing to manage the operational phases of the project.

If the project initiation activities have not been properly done, the prudent project manager should decline to undertake the project. This was certainly the approach taken by my employers who provided project management services to external clients, and I know of other project practitioners who do the same.

In other words, project managers must ensure not only that they are “doing the project right”, but also that they are “doing the right project”. This dual obligation is incorporated in Figure 3-3 following, against “technical project management”.

Implications for the project management community

Not only do individual project managers lose some credibility when their project fail, but the project management community at large also loses elements of credibility, which can readily cumulate if this happens too often.

It therefore follows that ***all sections of the project management community should do all they can to get into the position of directly influencing, and ultimately controlling, all aspects of project initiation.*** This is particularly relevant to those sections of the community who still see project management as an “execution-only” discipline.

To facilitate this process, it appears natural to suggest that ***all bodies of knowledge of project management, competency standards, educational programs and the like should include specific coverage of all project initiation phases and activities.*** This would not only provide guidelines for individual project managers, but would also help in promoting project management’s “ownership” of project initiation processes.

The best way for project management to ensure that the project initiation has been properly done is for project managers to become directly involved in the initiation activities

This happens as a matter of course in the project-based organizations in which I have worked. I can only assume that the majority of cases where project managers do not become involved must be in production-based organizations. As just noted, I discuss ways and means of facilitating such involvement in the fourth and fifth articles of this series, as follows.

The fourth article is concerned with increasing Level 2: “Project” success in the context of how the fifteen project initiation-related causes of failure relate to initiation phases of the project life cycle. The latter are developed in some detail, and then approaches to progressively increasing project management involvement in these phases are proposed.

The fifth article is concerned with increasing Level 3: “Business” success, in the context of organizational strategy formulation and planning, the development of strategic portfolios of programs and projects to implement strategic plans, and approaches to progressively increasing project management involvement in these processes.

In summary, I am advocating (along with many other writers on project management) a perception of the project manager’s role in a substantially broader context than is often portrayed. I illustrate this with a diagram from Naughton 2013, to which I add the relevant success levels being used in this series.

Expanding the project manager’s role – Naughton’s Talent Triangle

Naughton 2013 nominates three major skill sets that tomorrow’s project leader will need to possess (as described in 2012 by PMI’s President and CEO, Mark Langley) – namely Technical project management, Leadership, and Strategic & Business management skills. This is shown in his Talent Triangle, which is illustrated (in a somewhat modified format) in Figure 3-3.

I have related the three Success Levels to what appear to me to be the appropriate “talent” in the Talent Triangle. Both Success Level 1: “Doing the project right”, and Success Level 2: “Doing the right project” are seen as key components of what Naughton describes as “Technical Project Management” talent. Naughton’s “Strategic and Business Management” talent is directly related to Success Level 3: “Business”.

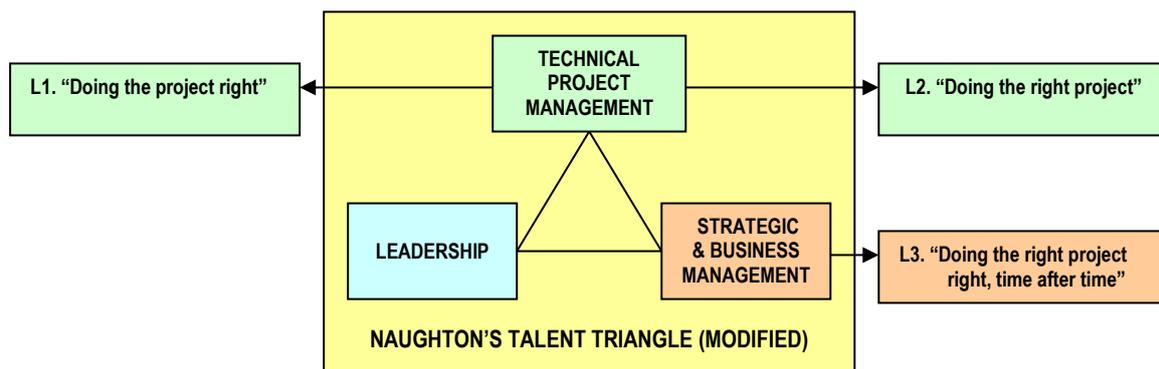


Figure 3-3: Naughton’s Talent Triangle, and the three success levels for projects

It will be noted that Naughton has nominated leadership as the third type of skill set needed by project managers. I believe few would argue against this.

Project management leadership-related causes of failure amounted to about a tenth of the total causes of failure over all project types sampled in the second article. Leadership-related causes of failure are relevant to all success levels, as indicated in Naughton’s Talent Triangle, but here we will discuss them in the context of Success Level 1.

RELATING PM LEADERSHIP-RELATED CAUSES WITH SUCCESS LEVEL 1

The components of this cause-of-failure group are detailed in Figure 3-4 against the Leadership skill set.

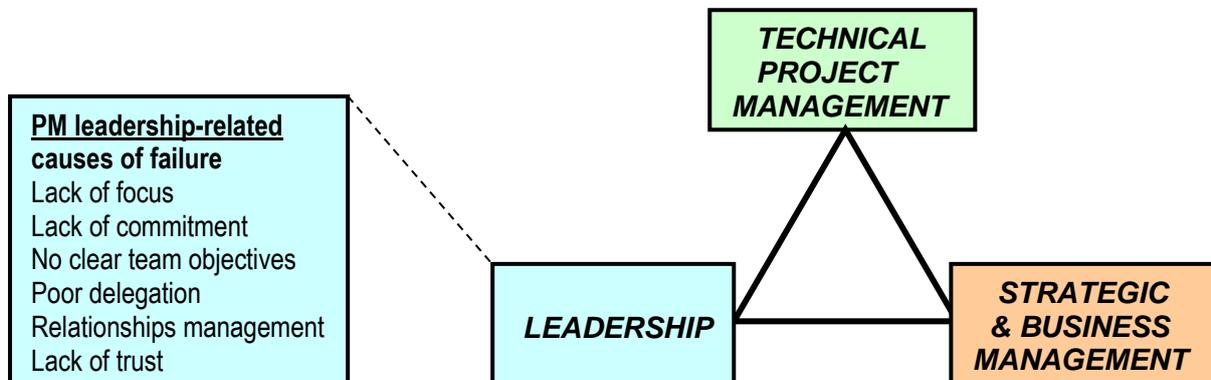


Figure 3-4: Relating PM leadership failure causes to Naughton’s Talent Triangle

There does appear to be some measure of agreement in the project management community that project leadership is very important. However, the coverage in the literature is rather variable. Morris 2013:199-200 lists several theories of leadership, but then notes that there appear to be two main schools of leadership thinking, which he calls “universal” and “contingency” (and which some others have called “traits” and “styles” respectively). There have been a reasonable number of project-specific contributions in relation to each leadership “school”.

The “universal” view of leadership suggests that there are enduring leadership traits which apply in all situations. However, as Hunt 1979:92 put it,

Because of the shortage of people with the Greek-god profile suggested by trait theory, style theory has superseded trait theory.

The more widely accepted view of project leadership is certainly the “contingency” one, which suggests that leadership styles are, or should be, contingent on the task, the business need, the environment, and the people needing leading – i.e. on all the different needs of the situation.

It is also noted here that current project management standards and education programs tend to emphasise project management tools and techniques – i.e. a particular set of ‘hard’ skills – at the expense of the ‘softer’ relational and interpersonal skills which leaders need to be effective. Good leadership needs both.

Overall, it appears to me that we should be doing much more than we currently are to help develop leadership capabilities in the project context.

RELATING THE TWO OTHER CAUSE-OF-FAILURE GROUPS WITH SUCCESS LEVEL 1

Lack of organizational support causes of failure

Lack of organizational support causes

Lack of top mgt support (3)
Resource mgt. problems (2)
Inadequate governance
Lack of training
Lack of PM focus
Lack of PM culture
No leadership stability

These causes of failure are generally unlikely to occur in project-based organizations, for obvious reasons, but are more likely to occur with projects in production-based organizations, particularly those operating under matrix organizational arrangements. Probably the most commonly encountered examples of lack of organizational support are problems with resources allocation. Some of the others are discussed in more detail in the next two articles.

Other external causes of failure

Other external causes of failure

Inflation
Adverse geophysical conditions
Unsupportive political environment (2)

These other external causes of project failure could well have particular relevance for Success Level 1 under certain circumstances, as for instance coping with runaway inflation on a project in a developing country.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

Project management operational-related causes of failure are seen as particularly relevant to Success Level 1: “Project management” success – “doing the project right”. It was first noted that most of the eleven components of this group of failures are standard items common to most project management standards and educational programs. This rather naturally raised the question about the effectiveness of the broader project management community’s efforts in setting standards, educational programs, etc, in helping reduce operation-related failures. It was concluded that we simply do not have enough validated data on the current situation to answer this question. I repeated the following recommendation from the second article.

A suggestion (or challenge) here is for global project management organisations (IPMA, PMI, apfpm, etc) to jointly create a framework to develop and share project success/ failure data, covering the widest possible range of project management types and application areas.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, if we continued to collect and build on such data, over a period of time we would have solid validated trend data, and therefore be in a properly informed position to assess the ongoing effectiveness of our educational and allied efforts to improve project management operational performance, and to take appropriate actions.

We then went on to consider how project initiation-related causes of failure related to Success Level 1: “Project management” success. It is clear that deficiencies in most, if not all project initiation-related components will directly, and adversely, affect operational phases of the project life cycle – i.e. “doing the project right”.

However, deficiencies in project initiation activities also directly and adversely affect Level 2: “Doing the right project”. So this raised the more general question – if the “right project” is not being done, due to failures in project initiation, how relevant does “doing the project right” become?

For individual project managers, it was concluded that, in most situations, the project managers must ensure that the project initiation has been properly done, and thence that the “right project” is being undertaken.

For the project management community, it was concluded that it should do all it can to get into the position of directly influencing, and ultimately controlling, all aspects of project initiation.

It was further recommended that all bodies of knowledge of project management, competency standards, educational programs and the like should include specific coverage of all project initiation phases.

Finally, it was concluded that the best way for project managers to ensure that the project initiation has been properly done is to become directly involved in the initiation activities. Ways of achieving this, particularly in production-based organizations, are topics addressed in the fourth and fifth papers of this series.

Project management leadership-related causes of failure are also very relevant to Success Level 1: “Project management” success, as well as other success levels.

There does appear to be some measure of agreement in the project management community that

- *leadership is of paramount importance in the project context;*
- *current project management standards and education programs tend to emphasise project management tools and techniques – i.e. a particular set of ‘hard’ skills – at the expense of the ‘softer’ relational and interpersonal skills which leaders need to be effective; and*
- *we should be doing much more than we currently are to help develop leadership capabilities in the project context.*

Future articles in this series

As already stated, the next two articles in this series will be particularly concerned with project initiation-related causes of failure, in the contexts of Level 2: “Project” success in the fourth article, and Level 3: “Business” success in the fifth.

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